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‘Iffen I Doan Love Yo’ Den Dar Ain’t No Water In Tar Riber’: Courtship and Love
Amongst the Enslaved in Antebellum North Carolina.

BY

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I seemed to have spent most of my time during my research visit to North Carolina bothering archivists for some reason or another. The staff and graduate students at Duke's Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library and the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina were fantastic at dealing with such a young and inexperienced researcher. Special thanks are given to Elizabeth Dunn

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Declaration

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.

Abstract

This thesis explores the significance of courtship and love in the lives of enslaved men and women in antebellum North Carolina. It underlines how the current historiography concerning the enslaved has largely neglected the emotional terrain and dynamics of enslaved life and argues that the existing historiography of courtship and love has similarly marginalized the experiences of the enslaved. Whilst more recent research has focussed upon enslaved familial and personal relationships, there still remains the need for a more in-depth and sustained consideration of the meaning and importance of courtship and love in the lives of the enslaved.

This thesis will attend to these gaps in historical scholarship by considering how the enslaved established and managed their courting relationships. It considers the practicalities of courtship for the enslaved as they mediated their own emotional needs and desires with the demands of the slave system and the slave-owner. It also examines the factors defining the shape of these relationships, including the opportunities available for the enslaved to establish courtships and the geographical and temporal spaces in which this could occur. It situates courtship within a narrative of resistance, illustrating the fact that courtship represented a significant social space for the enslaved through which they were able to resist and renegotiate the mechanisms of control and regulation embedded in the system of slavery.

The majority of source material for this research derives from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives. These narratives of formerly enslaved men and women reveal much to the historian interested in slavery and the psychology of the enslaved in the American South. As well as the WPA narratives this thesis draws attention to the folklore tale as an aspect of enslaved culture that can reveal much regarding the norms, values and ideals that structured the private and personal world of the enslaved.

PART I

METHODS, SOURCES AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Introduction

I've heard some of the young people laugh about slave love, but they should envy the love which kept mother and father so close together in life and even held them in death.¹

Alonzo Haywood's comment reflected on the relationship between his father, Willis Haywood, and his mother, Mirana Denson, who were both enslaved in antebellum North Carolina. Alonzo Haywood was interviewed during the 1930s in the former slave-holding state of North Carolina for the Works Progress Administration project (henceforth WPA). The prevailing view amongst historians and white North American society in general at this time was that sexual relationships between the enslaved had been promiscuous, casual, and invested with little real emotional meaning.² Such was the portrayal of enslaved life and the characterisation of enslaved men and women in the American South that they were deemed as having been incapable of falling in love or establishing relationships that were predicated around feelings of affection, intimacy or tenderness.

The suggestion that love between enslaved men and women was something that most people "laugh(ed) about" is still reflected in the current historiography concerning the enslaved in the American South. Although many historians have considered the role

¹ Interview with Alonzo Haywood, interviewed for the Works Progress Administration Narratives (henceforth WPA narratives), North Carolina Narratives, George P. Rawick, [ed.], *The American Slave, A Composite Autobiography*, vol. 14, pt. 1, (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1972), 384. This volume is part of a collection containing the narratives of formerly enslaved men and women from across the southern states. For further information see George P. Rawick, [ed.], *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vols. 1-19, (Westport, Connecticut, London, Greenwood Press, 1972); George Rawick, Jan Hillegas and Ken Lawrence, [eds.], *The American Slave, Supplement Series 1*, vols. 1-12, (Westport, Connecticut, London, Greenwood Press, 1977); George Rawick, *The American Slave, Supplement Series 2*, vols. 1-10, (Westport, Connecticut, London, Greenwood Press, 1979). The narratives used for this thesis were the *North Carolina and South Carolina Narratives*, vol. 11, Supplement Series 1, (Westport, Connecticut, London, Greenwood Press, 1977); *North Carolina Narratives*, vols. 14 & 15, (Westport, Connecticut, London, Greenwood Press, 1972).

² This historiography will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

of the family in the lives of the enslaved, little attention has been paid to the feelings and emotional bonds that tied enslaved couples together. The current historiography has largely neglected the means and ways in which enslaved couples met, fell in love and communicated their feelings to one another. Until very recently historians concerned with exploring the dynamics of enslaved life have either dismissed ideas about enslaved love as a topic unworthy of consideration or have failed even to consider its existence.

This thesis will focus upon the courting relationships of enslaved men and women in antebellum North Carolina in order to illustrate how the enslaved were able to create and maintain courtships that were grounded in particular ideals of intimacy, affection, mutual consent and attraction. My analysis will consider the primary courtship experiences of enslaved men and women, typically those that occurred in adolescence and that usually led to a lasting relationship. I will argue that these courtships represented a significant social space within which the enslaved engaged in particular acts of appropriation, subversion and resistance in order to preserve their emotional and physical bonds with a member of the opposite sex.

Courtship, as Steven Stowe has pointed out, has had a 'strange career and a dubious standing in the study of family history.'³ Although more recently academics such as Larry Hudson and Emily West have contributed significant discussions of enslaved courtship to the historiography, there still remains the need for a more in-depth and sustained consideration of this aspect of enslaved life.⁴ As in West's research, enslaved courtship has usually been somewhat submerged in a broader study of marriage

³ Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the lives of the Planters*, (Baltimore, London, John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 50.

⁴ Larry Hudson, *To Have and To Hold: Slave Work and Family Life in Antebellum South Carolina*, (Athens, Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 1997); Emily West, *Love and Affection, Exploitation and Resistance: The Lives of Male and Female Slaves in Antebellum South Carolina*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Liverpool, 1997); Emily West, "Surviving Separation: Cross Plantation Marriages and the Slave Trade in Antebellum South Carolina", *Journal of Family History*, (1999), 212-231; Emily West, "The Debate on the Strength of Slave Families: South Carolina and the Importance of Cross-Plantation Marriages", *Journal of American Studies*, 33, (1999), 221-41; Emily West, "Masters and Marriages, Profits and Paternalism: Slave Owner's Perspectives on Cross-Plantation Unions in Antebellum South Carolina", *Slavery and Abolition*, 21 (April 2000), No 1, 56-76.

and the family. Consequently, courtship has been understood as a ‘...mere passage instead of its own social event.’⁵ This thesis offers a point of departure from existing research which considers the role of courtship for the enslaved only as part of the process of family formation rather than as a significant life experience in its own right.

The processes of courtship for the enslaved were mediated by the demands of the slave system, yet the active pursuit of such relationships highlights their fundamental importance. Furthermore, this thesis claims that the enslaved negotiated, challenged and resisted aspects of the slave system in their desire to pursue or maintain a courtship. In many ways courtship represented an arena of contestation between the enslaved and their owners. The nature of the slave system in the American South inevitably left enslaved men and women subject to the control of their master and mistress and therefore their mobility and social freedoms were limited. In order to manage their courtships successfully the enslaved were required to renegotiate the power relations that structured their lives. Resistance for the enslaved could assume many guises and in numerous cases the pursuit of a courtship represented an implicit and covert challenge to the regulatory measures embedded in the southern slave system.

Locating Themes

Love and emotions have been absent from much of the historical analysis concerning the enslaved in the American South. Moreover as this thesis will illustrate, the enslaved have also been neglected in the historiography of love and emotions. This is especially evident when one considers the wealth of material relating to the development of romantic love on the North American mainland, and the historical attention that has been given to the courtship practices of the white planter elite. The historian’s neglect of the experiences of the enslaved has created a substantial gap in the historiography, which can no longer be justified.

⁵ Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*, 50.

As evidenced by material contained in both the WPA narratives and the published autobiographies of the formerly enslaved, their courtships and intimate relationships were often framed within particular ideals of romantic love. This thesis is not primarily concerned with exploring the origins of the notion of romantic love amongst the enslaved. However, it suggests that these understandings emerged out of the processes of cultural interaction between enslaved and free, and black and white in the slave-holding South. By the antebellum period, few enslaved men and women were arriving on the North American mainland directly from West Africa. After 1807 the external slave trade was outlawed and subsequently the enslaved population on the North American mainland became one of the only slave populations in the world to maintain itself successfully through natural reproduction. By the 1830s, most enslaved men and women had been born into slavery in the American South. This shared experience and the development of a common language within the quarters of the enslaved laid the basis for a culture that blended aspects of their African heritage, such as folklore, proverbs and song, with their interaction and adaptation of components of numerous aspects of southern white culture.⁶ I shall discuss further in Chapter Five the processes of cultural adaptation that occurred between the enslaved and the white slave-holding elite in the arena of courtship, and in particular the marriage ceremony.

The historiography concerning the development of romantic love in Europe and the North American mainland has pinpointed the first half of the nineteenth century as the era in which notions of love and romance came to dominate the personal and intimate choices made by white men and women. Parental consent was desired yet no

⁶ Although I use the term “southern white culture” it should be stressed that neither white nor black culture in the south was monolithic. Southern society was stratified not only on the basis of race but also by elements such as class, gender and ethnicity. Cultural adaptation and interaction occurred not only between the enslaved and the white southern elite but also between the enslaved and members of the white labouring poor and free blacks who inhabited southern slave states such as North Carolina and who the enslaved often worked and socialised with beyond the confines of the plantation. For further reading see Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Tim Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860*, (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2001).

longer necessary and as such men and women began to make their own decisions regarding the choice of their future spouse. In addition, discourses of romantic love and gendered ideals began to govern the hearts, minds, and behaviour of many young men and women within white North American society.

This thesis suggests that the enslaved were also subject to, and acted upon, these ideas regarding love and romance in the antebellum period. In considering the relationships of the enslaved during the first half of the nineteenth century it is possible to locate them within a wider cultural framework. Narratives of formerly enslaved men and women further illustrate the availability of a rich source of material that allows the historian to explore enslaved ideals concerning romantic love, while also pointing to the means by which the enslaved may be written into the existing historiography of love and romance. This matter will be explored further in Chapter Three.

Whilst common themes emerge in historical considerations of the courtships of both the white southern elite and the enslaved, this thesis will also suggest that courtship represented a site of resistance for the enslaved. By the antebellum period slavery had been institutionalised across the American South. The enslaved were subject to increasing restrictions that regulated their mobility and behaviour. Furthermore, certain aspects of enslaved life, including that of intimate relationships, came under the observation and control of the slave-owner. However, the enslaved themselves sought to define the nature and shape of their own courtship experiences. Consequently the romantic relationships of the enslaved became a landscape upon which the enslaved fought for a degree of emotional autonomy. Courting relationships provided a certain amount of autonomy for the enslaved through which they were able to resist the measures of control embedded in the slave system. Courtship also allowed for the enslaved to reject and redefine the prevailing white assumptions concerning their sexual and gendered identities. These intimate affairs provided an opportunity for enslaved men and women to occupy distinct roles that conformed to particular gendered codes of

conduct. Such behaviour belied the common white myths that emerged out of the slaveholding South regarding the gendered characteristics of enslaved men and women

In addition to considering the factors that shaped and defined the courting relationship of the enslaved this thesis also argues that it is possible to understand the internal dynamics of the enslaved courting experiences through specific components of their own culture such as folklore. Chapter Seven examines how the folklore tale might help us to understand the ways in which the enslaved clarified notions of courtship and love, and how the medium of storytelling served as an important means through which the enslaved could explore and resolve questions regarding the courting relationship. The paucity of written accounts left by the enslaved, especially those that relate to their emotional experiences, has probably contributed to the neglect by many historians of this particular aspect of enslaved life. Whilst historians have previously considered the folklore tale as a significant and important part of the culture that developed in the quarters of the enslaved, this thesis argues that it might be further understood as a tool through which we can more clearly understand the personal and intimate in the lives of the enslaved.

Defining Terms

This thesis focuses on the slaveholding state of North Carolina during the first half of the nineteenth century. In order to prioritise the intimate and emotional experiences of the enslaved I considered it necessary to limit the scope of source material used in this research. In concentrating on one slave state in particular, I have sustained a more comprehensive and complex discussion, rather than providing a generalised overview of enslaved life in the American South. As I discuss in Chapter Four, North Carolina was typically characterised by small farms and plantations. Even in those areas of the state that were heavily populated by the enslaved, the majority were forced to conduct their affairs across plantations, due to the relatively small number of slaves held by individual slave-owners. Thus, courtships that were formed across

plantations and the ways in which these were managed is a particular concern of this thesis.

Although this research focuses upon the enslaved in North Carolina it is not concerned with understanding how the regional diversity of this slave-holding state affected the dynamics of enslaved courtship. Chapter Four does reflect on the differences that characterised particular regions of North Carolina and how such variations affected the experience of enslavement in the state. However, due to the limitations of the source materials available it was not possible to consider how the courtship experiences of the enslaved in one part of the state might have differed compared to those in another. The majority of the WPA interviews were conducted with men and women who had previously been enslaved in northern counties such as Wake, Warren, Johnston, and Franklin, and coastal counties such as Duplin, where there were larger plantations and thus greater numbers of the enslaved than were to be found further west in the Appalachian region in counties such as Buncombe. This research focuses on these northern and coastal regions, but this is a reflection of the source materials available rather than a specific research interest in these particular areas.

This thesis also limits its analysis to the first half of the nineteenth century and is therefore located in the antebellum period of southern history, generally defined as the era from about 1810c. until emancipation in 1865c. More specifically most of the source materials that have been employed for this research relate to the latter half of this period. For example, the WPA interviews with formerly enslaved men and women, discussed in greater detail in Chapter One, reflect on personal memories of enslavement and emancipation from the 1850s onwards. However, several of the narratives do discuss the courting experiences of parents and grandparents and thus I have also been able to include examples that illustrate the experiences of courtship for the enslaved during earlier decades of the antebellum period.

Because this thesis is concerned with an intimate aspect of enslaved culture and seeks to recognise the personhood of the enslaved man and woman I have whenever

possible and in the correct context employed the term “enslaved” in favour of that of “slave”. It has been argued that the term “slave” has ‘facilitated the fashioning of a limited discourse of victimhood...that has relied on unjust stereotypical notions of biological, geographical and linguistic notions of African “inferiority”.’⁷ Alternatively the term “enslaved” is suggestive of the power relations inherent in the system of slavery and also recognises the capabilities of the individuals concerned. I do however deploy the term “slave” on occasion, in particular when discussing slave-owners’ perceptions of their human chattel. It would be anachronistic to impose a modern interpretation of the term “slave” onto slave-owners’ evaluation of their labour force. Indeed, the majority of slave-owners did perceive their work force as “slaves” rather than as “enslaved” individuals possessed of full or partial agency, and therefore defined them within stereotypes based on notions of inferiority.

In the course of this thesis I have employed terms such as “romantic love”, “courtship”, “ritual” and “custom”. Any definition of these concepts is culturally and historically bound and therefore it is necessary for the purpose of this research to outline the meaning of such terms in the context of the slaveholding South. It has been argued by several historians that the concept of romantic love is located and shaped in specific historical contexts. This way of thinking about romantic love has an extensive historiography, which will be discussed further in Chapter Three. Lawrence Stone has argued that by the late eighteenth century a concept of romantic love was celebrated by the English middle classes as the only real basis for marriage. This ideal was based upon feelings of intimacy, mutual attraction and personal consent.⁸ It is such definitions that this thesis will work within when using concepts of romantic love.

⁷ John F. Campbell, “Voicing Slavery: Writing the Caribbean and its Diaspora in the New Millennium”, *Caribbean Voices: Writing the Caribbean and its Diaspora*, Society for Caribbean Studies Conference, University of Warwick, 2002, unpublished paper.

⁸ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1977).

Due to the nature of the source materials available to the historian interested in the emotional contours of enslaved life, it is difficult to understand the ways in which the enslaved articulated their own ideas about romantic love. The WPA narratives were collected and written during the 1930s and thus reflect the language and style of that particular period. Whilst the longer published narratives of the formerly enslaved do provide greater insight into how we might categorise enslaved understandings of romantic love, they too were written for a specific audience and reflect the romantic style of writing during the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the source materials do indicate that the enslaved framed their courtships within notions of romantic love. The narratives contain several references that reflect relationships that were grounded in ideals of intimacy and intense emotional feeling between enslaved couples. Thus this thesis is concerned with considering what the enslaved said about their feelings and understandings of romantic love as well as analysing their actions in the arena of courtship.

Courtship provided a context in which feelings of affection might be expressed for the enslaved. Ellen Rothman provides a working definition for the concept of courtship in which she distinguishes between *courting* behaviour and the *courtship* relationship. Rothman defines courting behaviour as those relationships of a more ‘casual or communal nature...’⁹ She contrasts this to *courtship*, which she uses to refer to ‘...activities that were *expected* to lead to marriage...’¹⁰ I have not attended to such nuances when employing such terms and have used both “courting” and “courtship” to refer to those relationships between mutually consenting enslaved men and women that were grounded in feelings of intimacy and affection. Certainly, there were levels of expectation from the enslaved community, family members and sometimes masters and mistresses, regarding the idea that certain relationships would lead to something more

⁹ Ellen Rothman, “Sex and Self-Control: Middle Class Courtship in America, 1770-1870”, *Journal of Social History*, 15 (1982), 409-425, 410. (emphasis in original)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

formalised, whilst other affairs were perhaps perceived as more casual in nature. However, several other factors, such as the slave's legal status in the South, which defined them as property and hence unable to legally form contracts such as marriage, and the influence of the slave-owner over the ways in which enslaved couples might have informally validated their union, inevitably impacted on the ways in which the enslaved defined and managed their courtships. It would therefore prove problematic to assess the differences between *courting* behaviour and *courtships* for the enslaved.

I have used the term “practices” to define activities undertaken in the process of courtship such as evading the patrol gangs or the use of specific social settings in order to establish a courtship. In addition I have also employed the term “ritual” to describe behaviour or events undertaken by the enslaved in the arena of love and courtship that contained some symbolic value. Steven Stowe has suggested that a “ritual” ‘...involved a unique heightening of ordinary experience, creating a sense of being outside normal place and time. Ritual challenges and refreshes by transforming business-as-usual into something unusual...’¹¹ Activities such as the “jumping of the broomstick” which sometimes occurred at the weddings of enslaved couples (as discussed further in Chapter Five) may be understood as a ritual. However, this ritual was largely imposed upon the enslaved by the white slave-owning classes, and thus its ritualised meaning spoke more about the dynamics of control and ownership in the lives of the enslaved than it did about the symbolic meaning of marriage for the enslaved. Other types of ritual, such as having a black preacher oversee their marriage ceremony, reflected something of far more significance for the enslaved themselves and allowed them to temporarily step outside the regimes of power that typically governed their lives.

¹¹ Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*, 1.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part One provides a discussion of the methods and sources employed in the course of the research as well as an overview of the existing historiography concerning the emotional experiences of the enslaved in the American South, and the development of ideas concerning love and romance in England and the North American mainland. Having provided this detailed consideration of the background to this research, the thesis then moves to Part Two, which represents the analytical chapters. Part Two firstly provides an overview of the history of North Carolina. It discusses the development of North Carolina as a slave-holding state, the formation of a slave-holding elite, and the experiences of enslavement in the region. Subsequent chapters reflect on how the enslaved in this particular state were able to manage their courting relationships from within the system of slavery, the meaning and significance of courtship in terms of resistance and the ways in which the historians may gain further insight into the emotional world of the enslaved through specific aspects of their culture such as the folklore tale.

Chapter One discusses the sources that I have employed in the course of this thesis. George Rawick's edited collection of interviews with formerly enslaved men and women, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* has formed the basis of much of my analysis for this research.¹² Rawick's collection contains the edited versions of the WPA interviews with formerly enslaved men and women, which took place across the southern states from 1936-38. Volume eleven, taken from Supplement Series one and volumes fourteen and fifteen, taken from the main collection, include those narratives from North Carolina and I have limited my analysis to the interviews contained within these volumes.

¹² Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vols. 1-19; Rawick, Hillegas and Lawrence, *The American Slave, Supplement Series 1*, vols. 1-12; Rawick, *The American Slave, Supplement Series 2*, vols. 1-10. The narratives used for this thesis were the *North Carolina and South Carolina Narratives*, vol. 11, Supplement Series 1; *North Carolina Narratives*, vols. 14 & 15.

These narratives have been the subject of fierce debate between historians. Some have questioned their reliability and validity and others have stressed the need for historians to approach these sources with caution. Defenders of the narratives have in turn highlighted the ambiguous nature of *any* historical source and have questioned why the WPA narratives in particular have been targeted by such severe criticism. Chapter One considers such arguments and suggests that the value of the narratives as an historical source far outweighs any problems that are inherent in this material.

This chapter also reflects on the usefulness of folklore as an historical source. Several historians have argued that the WPA narratives should be read as a type of folkloric tale in which individuals recalled stories and memories from their past. Despite such arguments however, there is a wealth of material embedded in the folklore tales of the enslaved that previous historical accounts have neglected. In a non-literate society, such as that of the enslaved in the American South, the spoken word assumed much greater meaning than the written article and hence should be incorporated into any attempts to understand the life and experiences of the enslaved.¹³

Joel Chandler Harris' edited collection of enslaved folklore has formed the basis of my analysis relating to this aspect of enslaved culture.¹⁴ The majority of these tales were collected and published in the course of the 1880s and 1890s, only one generation after emancipation had occurred. I argue in the course of Chapter One that these tales partially reflected certain elements of enslaved life. That they were retained and retold in the post-emancipation South serves only to emphasise their significance and worth as a historical source.

¹³ For further reading on oral cultures and oral history see Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, [eds], *The Oral History Reader*, (London, New York, Routledge, 1998).

¹⁴ Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings: The Folklore of the Old Plantation*, (New York, D Appleton and Co, 1880); *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*, (Boston, New York, Riverside Press, 1883); *Daddy Jake the Runaway and Short Stories Told After Dark by Uncle Remus*, (New York, Century Co, 1889); *Uncle Remus and His Friends: Old Plantation Stories, Songs and Ballads with Sketches of Negro Character*, (Boston, New York, Riverside Press, 1893).

Chapter Two reviews existing scholarship to explore the place of love and emotions in the historiography of the enslaved. This chapter concentrates on Herbert Gutmans' seminal text regarding the enslaved family and the subsequent critiques of Gutman's analysis.¹⁵ It also considers Gutman's claim that West African traditions were one of the most significant factors shaping familial life for the enslaved, in light of the inadequacy of the existing literature concerning West African familial practices. In addition Chapter Two examines the proliferation of research concerning the enslaved family in the past two decades, in part as a response to Gutman's work. Love and romance have become considerations in more recent historical accounts of enslaved life and culture. Important work such as that of Larry Hudson and Emily West, discussed in Chapter Two, has outlined the ways in which emotional relationships were established and maintained by the enslaved.¹⁶ However, as I have already noted, the importance of courtship has been secondary in these accounts to a more general understanding of marriage and the family amongst the enslaved.

Chapter Two also considers the stereotypes concerning black sexualised and gendered identities that emerged out of the slave-holding South. These stereotypes were often uncritically incorporated into the work of certain scholars during the twentieth century who relied on the racialised discourses established in the slave South, in order to explain and define the personal relationships of the enslaved. Chapter Two traces these representations back to early travel accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which contributed to a discourse on black sexual identity that subsequently re-surfaced in the debates of the 1960s and 1970s concerning the nature of enslaved life and the modern black family.

¹⁵ Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1976).

¹⁶ Hudson, *To Have and To Hold: West, Love and Affection, Exploitation and Resistance*; West, "Surviving Separation"; West, "The Debate on the Strength of Slave Families"; West, "Masters and Marriages".

Chapter Three considers the historiography of love and emotions and the location of the enslaved in these discussions. This chapter explores historiographical understandings of the development of romantic love, before attending to the nature of this debate in the context of the American South. In demonstrating the richness of the historiography concerning love and romance amongst the southern white elite, Chapter Three examines the absence of the enslaved in this body of historical scholarship. Finally, the chapter argues that despite the exclusion of the enslaved from this historiography, it does provide a useful template for similar analyses of enslaved courtship. This chapter argues that themes such as consent, the social context of courtship and the gendered dynamics of the courting relationship are reflected in the courtships of both the white southern elite and the enslaved.

Chapter Four forms the first of the chapters contained in Part Two. The chapter begins with an historical account of North Carolina and its development as a slaveholding state. It considers how North Carolina established itself as a colony that was increasingly dependent on the labour of the enslaved. It then focuses on the development of North Carolina as one of the slave-holding states on the North American mainland. This chapter examines how slavery developed as a distinct and specific feature of life in colonial North Carolina and how slavery came to dominate the diverse economies of this state by the early nineteenth century.

The primary focus of Chapter Four is an examination of the experiences of enslavement in North Carolina. In order to understand how the enslaved were able to manage their courting relationships this chapter discusses the different labour regimes imposed on the enslaved in the fields of the plantations and farms, in industries such as turpentine, and for those located within the household as domestics. In addition, this chapter illustrates the typical life cycle of the enslaved in North Carolina. I have considered such questions in order to understand the average age at which the enslaved man or woman might have encountered their first courtship or, through an examination of life expectancy, the possibility of parental influence on the relationships of young

enslaved couples. Chapter Four also contains a discussion of the elements of regulation and control that structured the implementation and maintenance of the slave system in North Carolina. This chapter outlines both legislative measures such as slave codes and also more explicit types of coercion and control, such as slave patrols.

Chapters Five and Six focus upon the role that courtship played in the lives of the enslaved in antebellum North Carolina. Building upon the discussion on the work regimes of the enslaved in the previous chapter, Chapter Five explores the practicalities of courtship for the enslaved in the context of their daily lives. It discusses the opportunities for the enslaved to court, which primarily presented themselves at events predicated around the concept of work such as corn shuckings and candy pullings. These occasions were organised on the master's time and therefore must be understood as "licensed free time" in which the enslaved were given permission to establish relationships or pursue a courtship. Chapter Five then compares these licensed social events to the semi-autonomous social world created and maintained by the enslaved away from the boundaries of the plantation and the gaze of the slave-owner. Social gatherings and frolics arranged in the slave quarters or in secret locations represented illicit opportunities for the enslaved to pursue a relationship beyond the gaze of the slave-owner, and thus enabled them to reclaim a sense of ownership over their emotional lives. This chapter therefore offers an illustration of the ways in which the enslaved appropriated time and space in which to establish and manage a courtship.

Chapter Six argues that through their pursuit of a courting relationship the enslaved were actively engage in resisting the system of slavery and their status as "slaves". This chapter begins by reflecting on the role of the slave-owner in defining and manipulating the emotional contours of enslaved life. Having established the types of regulatory measures to which enslaved courtship was subject, Chapter Six suggests that these mechanisms of control were actively resisted and rejected by the enslaved as they sought to define their own personal and intimate relationships. Acts such as leaving the plantation at night without a pass from the slave-owner, in order to visit a lover on a

neighbouring plantation, meant that the enslaved were forced to evade and occasionally confront the local patrol gangs who monitored their movements after dark. The desire to maintain or establish a courtship might have forced the enslaved to risk grave physical danger in the form of the patrollers. Furthermore, within the courting relationship the enslaved were able to embody particular gendered identities that were denied to them in their status as slaves. Thus, Chapter Six suggests that courtship was an arena within which the enslaved could engage in everyday forms of resistance that rejected and redefined the modes of control and regulation that shaped this aspect of their lives.

This chapter also considers more overt methods of resistance that were occasionally used by the enslaved in order to establish or maintain a courting relationship. A limited number of tales emerge from the source material detailing the murder of a master by his slaves, their motive being the desire to create or maintain ties with somebody of their own choosing. This Chapter suggests that such actions were not typical amongst the enslaved in antebellum North Carolina and should not be understood as a primary example of the ways in which the enslaved demanded the right to control their emotional lives. The significance of these tales, especially as they were passed down through generations, can be found in what they communicate about enslaved ideals and values concerning the significance of emotional ties and the primary importance of preserving these bonds.

Chapter Seven concentrates on the folklore tale as an aspect of enslaved culture that can further illuminate enslaved understandings of love and courtship. It moves away from the thesis' previous focus upon North Carolina and instead offers a broader interpretation of how we might understand the role of folklore in the lives of the enslaved. This chapter argues that the folklore tale partially reflected certain features of enslaved life and experiences, as demonstrated through their familiar social settings and the activities of the characters in the tales. Furthermore, the courtship contest formed a central feature of many of these stories, and this chapter argues that through folklore the

enslaved were able to pose questions and seek solutions regarding the dilemmas of courtship and love.

Chapter Seven also considers the ways in which the enslaved reflected on their different gendered identities as embodied in characters such as the charming trickster, Brer Rabbit and the vain, foolish Miss Wolf. Many of the folklore tales projected particular versions of masculinity and femininity. These gendered identities were brought to the fore in tales concerned with the contest of courtship. Consequently, it is possible to understand such gendered representations as illustrative of the ideals of enslaved men and women concerning appropriate gendered behaviour and the specific qualities that the enslaved might have searched for when establishing a courtship themselves.

This chapter considers the recurring themes found in the fictitious folklore tales that converge with those contained in the memories of former enslaved men and women. Discussions of resistance, subversion, and the trickster character can be found in both the folklore tale and the individual recollections of enslaved men and women. Parallels can also be drawn concerning the specific images of masculinity and femininity embedded in both the fictitious folklore tale and the narratives of formerly enslaved men and women. Chapter Seven provides a comparative analysis of several of the folklore tales with the narratives of formerly enslaved men and women to illustrate the ways in which the folklore tale replicated certain aspects of enslaved life whilst also reflecting particular romantic ideals and desires.

In the course of the Conclusion, I highlight the wealth of source material that is contained in this research. Such qualitative evidence leaves historians unable to justify their lack of attention to the emotional dynamics of enslaved life. Based upon the material presented in this thesis, I want to argue that the existing sources provide a fertile ground for further investigation. Thus, the Conclusion suggests that having focussed this research on the slave-holding state of North Carolina it would be of

interest to consider the ways in which the experiences of enslavement impacted on the courting relationships of the enslaved in other parts of the antebellum American South.

The Conclusion also reflects upon the ways in which the courting relationship represented a terrain upon which the enslaved were able to negotiate and redefine the limits of their emotional lives. The courtship experience illustrated a form of resistance for the enslaved through which they were able to contest and challenged the apparatus of regulation and control inherent in the system of slavery in the American South. By considering the courtship experiences of the enslaved in this manner, this research has been able to move beyond the charges of romanticism and idealism levelled at the work of historians such as Gutman, whilst also developing the more recent work of scholars such as Emily West. Focussing upon courtship as a significant social event in the lives of the enslaved and illustrating the competing definitions and meanings that structured these courtship experiences reflects the realities of enslavement whilst also communicating the desire, on the part of the enslaved, for a degree of social and cultural autonomy.

The Conclusion also returns to a discussion of the existing historiography concerning love and courtship and reflects on the contributions that this research has made. The arguments presented in this thesis not only add to the current historiography but also modify it. In arguing that the enslaved were able to establish relationships that were grounded in ideals of romantic love, this research begins to question the idea that romantic love was simply the product of certain ideological or political forces. That the enslaved were largely remote from these influences and yet were still able to operate within such frameworks implies a reconsideration of how the historical construction of romantic love might be understood.

Chapter One

Methods and Sources

1.1: Letting Your Heart Rule Your Head – The Place of Emotions In Historical Research

History has been felt; the lives men and women have lived have had an emotional dimension. That dimension has not only given shape to history but also created history, as men and women have acted on their feelings sometimes knowingly, sometimes not.¹

In this research I will consider the role of love, as it was understood within the enslaved communities of North Carolina. Theodore Zeldin wrote in 1982 that '[Love] has yet to be studied by historians for its own sake, in all its varied manifestations and ambiguous guises, from an independent focus.'² Chapter Three of this thesis explores the ways in which subsequent historians have gradually moved the emotions, and in particular love to the centre of historical research. However, as both Chapters Two and Three argue, historians have still failed to consider sufficiently the place of the emotions in the lives of the enslaved. Whilst more recent work has begun to focus upon the emotional dynamics of enslaved life, the majority of research has not regarded enslaved love as a subject worthy of distinct consideration. Rather it has been implicitly written into a history concerning familial relationships and has thus failed to emerge as a significant feature of enslaved life in its own right.

The emotional dynamics of the world of the enslaved have previously been marginalized in favour of various agendas seeking to prove or undercut the notion of stability within the family of the enslaved, with the long term aim of making links

¹ Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, *An Emotional History of the United States*, (New York, London, New York University Press, 1998), 1.

² Theodore Zeldin, "Personal History and the History of the Emotions", *Journal of Social History*, 15 (1981-2), 339-347, 343.

between the families of the enslaved and those of contemporary Black Americans. I demonstrate in Chapter Two how this resulted in a picture of affective relationships between the enslaved that was deprived of any emotional depth. Only since the work of Herbert Gutman in the 1970s, and more recent research building on his work, such as that of Emily West, has an understanding of the emotional contours of enslaved life begun to emerge.³ In seeking to place the emotional dimensions of an enslaved couples' relationship at the centre of debate I will not attempt to subordinate this relationship to the political or the economic. Rather I will reflect on how the context of enslavement shaped the form that courtships could take, and the impact that enslavement had upon the context of the courting relationship.

It has been the elusive quality of emotions that has made them so difficult for the historian to comprehend. This may partly explain why so much of the emotional world of the enslaved has been neglected or written into a broader history of enslaved life, which fails to fully explore the significance of emotional experience, and the shape and definition of the courting experience for the enslaved. In contrast to historical analysis that focuses on observable events, the history of emotions is much more difficult to understand and interpret because of their non-physical nature. William Faulkner has reflected on the difficulties of reconstructing thoughts and feelings through source materials such as letters. He wrote 'We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw...'⁴

³ See Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*; West, *Love and Affection, Exploitation and Resistance*; West, "Surviving Separation: Cross Plantation Marriages and the Slave Trade in Antebellum South Carolina"; West, "The Debate on the Strength of Slave Families: South Carolina and the Importance of Cross-Plantation Marriages"; West, "Masters and Marriages, Profits and Paternalism: Slave Owner's Perspectives on Cross-Plantation Unions in Antebellum South Carolina."

⁴ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, (London, Chatto & Windus, 1969), 100-101.

Faulkner also considered the thought processes that attend the historical examination of such sources:

‘...carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene...’⁵

The emotions can be only partially uncovered then, by the historian who attempts to establish how an individual was feeling at a given moment in their lives. Love, for example may be particularly difficult to explore because of its ephemeral nature. As Chapter Three discusses further the concept of love is historically and socially constructed and thus it may not be possible to understand fully the emotional dynamics of an individual’s experiences. Yet the growing emphasis on the emotions in more recent historical analysis has given flavour and depth to such research whilst also providing the groundwork for uncovering the silent and marginalized aspects of how history was lived.

1.2: Defending the WPA Narratives

This research gains much of its primary source material from George Rawick’s edited collection, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Rawick’s collection contains the edited versions of the WPA interviews with formerly enslaved men and women, which took place across the southern states from 1936-38. Compiled in

⁵ *Ibid.* 101.

seventeen states and with over two thousand interviews, the WPA narratives ‘...constitute a unique and illuminating source of information not only about the institution of slavery but about the psychology of the enslaved as well.’⁶

The interviews constituted part of an ongoing endeavour by a growing number of academics from the 1920s onwards to discover the history and “essence” of rural black culture in the United States. Independent research was established in the latter half of the 1920s across several of the southern states in order to secure interviews with the formerly enslaved.⁷ These disparate projects were finally brought under the umbrella of the Federal Writer’s project, directed by Henry G. Alsberg, and established in 1935. The project formed part of the New Deal employment programme and was intended to provide work for jobless college graduates, especially those from the black community, who had been neglected in previous reconstruction plans. Unfortunately this element of the project was not implemented in several of the states involved and consequently it was primarily white local men who participated as interviewers for the WPA initiatives.

In the initial discussions for the Writers’ Project no provisions were made for the collection of autobiographies or memories of the formerly enslaved, and instead the project concerned itself with the creation of numerous state and local guides providing a ‘...geographical-social-historical portrait of the states, cities and localities of the entire United States.’⁸ However, the spontaneous collection of interviews with those who had previously been enslaved, which was originally undertaken in Georgia and Florida as part of the wider project in these two states, became the catalyst for a more widespread investigation into the life histories of the black community across the upper and lower

⁶ Norman Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection”, *American Quarterly*, 19 (1967), 534-553, 534,

⁷ The Fisk Project conducted at Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee was directed by Charles. S. Johnson and included interviews with formerly enslaved men and women across Tennessee and Kentucky in 1929. John B. Cade at Southern University, Georgia led a similar project. For a more detailed discussion of the slave narrative collection see, Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection”.

⁸ Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection”, 544.

southern states. I have preserved the dialectal style of the interviews in the course of this research, even though this was a product of the interviewer's interpretation. The parlance used in the published versions of the interviews was an attempt to authenticate the voice of the formerly enslaved and further validates the contents of their narratives. By relating the interviews in their original published form, this research aims to reflect these initial efforts to provide the formerly enslaved with a degree of cultural integrity.⁹

The interviews eventually came under the direction of John A. Lomax, honorary curator of the Archives of American Folk Song in the Library of Congress. Lomax headed the folklore division of the Writers' Project and thus the interviews were understood to be folkloric, personal histories rather than a general history of slavery. B. A. Botkin, folklore editor of the Federal Writer's project, argued that the folk histories contained in the WPA narratives did not have to be understood as *true life histories*. He suggested that they should instead be seen as a '...kind of legendary history of one's life and times, which furnishes unconscious evidence for the historian...'¹⁰

Historians have approached the WPA narratives with much more caution than Botkin had envisaged. Some have questioned the validity of the narratives and their reliability as a source representative of the life of the enslaved in the American South. Many historians have asked whether the age of the respondents affected their memories of slavery and point to the length of time that had elapsed since most of those interviewed had been emancipated (at least 70 years) as another factor that may have influenced their memories of enslavement. Others have criticised the WPA narratives on the basis of the artificial nature of the interviewing situation in which they took place, and point in particular to the presence of white male interviewers on the project, which

⁹ In order to be consistent with my use of quotes from source materials I have also maintained the original spelling, grammar, and punctuation of archival sources and the folklore stories used in this thesis. I have not used the abbreviation *sic* to explain or clarify any misspellings or grammatical errors unless the quote may be misunderstood without this annotation.

¹⁰ B. A. Botkin, [ed.], *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1945), 59.

might have shaped and distorted the response of black interviewees. In defence of the WPA narratives, some historians have emphasised the elusive nature of *any* historical source and questioned why the WPA narratives should be singled out in particular. They have also highlighted the usefulness of such testimonies, which, they argued, outweigh the problems encountered in using such sources.

For many, the main difficulty in using the WPA narratives with any confidence is the issue of memory. Donna Spindel has argued that whilst the interviews raise a number of evidentiary concerns the most troublesome ‘...hinge on the reliability of long term memory.’¹¹ Spindel pointed out that at the time of being interviewed, these men and women ranged in age from 72 years to 108 years old and at least two thirds of the respondents were over 80 years old. Spindel claimed that the fact that the majority of those interviewed had limited access to education and literacy could have had detrimental effects on their capacity to recall remote events, especially as they were being asked to recollect memories of events that had taken place over seventy years previously. Thus, Spindel concluded that the narratives were highly unreliable as a true testimony of the life of the enslaved.

Paul Escott has claimed however, that there is no necessary connection between an individual’s age and their memory. He wrote that whilst ‘memories are fallible, and in the 1930s the former slaves were recalling events of seventy or eighty years before...it is also true that the brain records and preserves the events of an individual’s life and that older people often dwell more in memory than the young.’¹² Escott also pointed to the fact that many of the events that the interviewees were asked to recall were pivotal moments in their lives – marriage, sale and separation, freedom – thus it

¹¹ Donna. J. Spindel, “Assessing Memory: Twentieth Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXVII (Autumn, 1996), 247-261, 252.

¹² Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 6. Also see Paul D. Escott, “The Art and Science of Reading WPA Slave Narratives”, in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr, [eds.], *The Slave’s Narrative*, (Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985).

was more likely that people would remember clearly events that were significant in their lives and that held meaning for them. Taking task with Spindel's argument concerning the consequences of the lack of formal education in the lives of the enslaved, we might employ B. A. Botkin's contention that '...In the bookless world, memory takes the place of history and biography.'¹³ Whilst literacy did become increasingly significant amongst the enslaved over the course of the early nineteenth century, the culture of the enslaved was largely one in which storytelling and memory took precedence over the written word, and as such recalling events that were distant or remote did not entail revising the written word but interpreting oral lore.

Escott argued that rather than the issue of memory, '...the most formidable problem encountered in using the narratives is the problem of candour.'¹⁴ Racial etiquette demanded that the black man and woman remained subservient to the white population in the post-emancipation American South and this was observed in the interviewing processes employed for the WPA project. As the majority of interviewers were local white men, often from former slave-owning families, the response of the black interviewees was no doubt shaped by former power relations embedded in the southern slave system, which still existed in the 1930s, and which were governed by factors of race, gender and class. John Blassingame was particularly critical of this element of the narratives and it was perhaps central to his decision not to include them within his influential text, *The Slave Community*.¹⁵ Blassingame argued that the interview situation was not conducive to accurate communication and recording between white interviewers and black respondents. He claimed that only in the specific states where black interviewers were used, such as Florida, could the historian gain anything reliable from the collection. The conditions in 1930s America - the Great Depression,

¹³ Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, 59.

¹⁴ Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 7.

¹⁵ John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, (New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972).

poverty and high unemployment especially amongst the African-American community - meant that the interviews took place within a situation of dependency and racism. Blassingame thus asserted that 'the answers to many of the questions on the WPA interview schedule could neither be divorced from the dependent position of the aged blacks nor the contemporary state of race relations in the South.'¹⁶

White interviewers generally lacked empathy with their respondents. Their view of the slave system was usually from the standpoint of the slave-owner, especially as many of the local whites who conducted the interviews were related to former slave-owners in the county. Black respondents were naturally cautious and guarded in their answers. However, Blassingame argued that by employing white women, as opposed to white men, to conduct the interviews, and black instead of white interviewers, the project went some way to overcome this problem.¹⁷ Possibly, white women had not posed the same threat to southern black men and women as had their male counterparts, because they had less access to formal methods of power and control and as such, the black community were perhaps more willing to provide honest answers without fear of reprisals. Blassingame suggested that the formerly enslaved who talked to black interviewers were far more willing to reveal the internal dynamics of enslaved life than those who were interviewed by white project workers.¹⁸

In the North Carolina narratives, 60 per cent of respondents were interviewed by women,¹⁹ yet none out of the seven interviewers were black.²⁰ The dynamics of power inherent within any interview situation leave us in a quandary. Should the North Carolina narratives be understood as any more representative or reliable because of the

¹⁶ John Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems", *Journal of Southern History*, 41 (November 1975), No 4, 473-492, 482.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 487-88.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 489.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 488.

²⁰ Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 11, Introduction, xli.

presence of white women on the interviewing staff? Even though white southern women were excluded from more formal routes of power, they were nevertheless part of the southern power nexus and many were probably the descendants of slave-owners in the local area. Thus, their presence on the interviewing staff in North Carolina may have done little to remedy the problems outlined by Blassingame.

We might also question whether the possible advantage of white southern women on the interviewing staff in North Carolina was outweighed and negated by the absence of black interviewers listed as WPA project workers? Or should the context and content of each narrative be measured on its own merit? Even had black interviewers been involved in the collection of the North Carolina narratives it is naïve to assume that this would have eradicated all the power dynamics that structured the interview situation. We can only assume that black interviewers did not represent a threat to black respondents in terms of racist attitudes and assumptions. Whilst college educated southern blacks may have represented a positive symbol of progress to the formerly enslaved it is also possible to speculate that many among the elderly black community may have viewed these black men and women with a degree of caution. Some may, for example, have resented the younger generation for attempting to adopt mainstream, white values and making use of white institutions to escape their black roots. The college educated black man and woman may have been no more knowable than the local white southerner.

Adding another layer to the defence of the narratives I would argue that experiences that provided the individual with a greater sense of self-esteem and pride, such as a successful courtship and falling in love, would be remembered and retold with fewer of the distortions and biases that may have characterised stories of punishment, cruel masters and the brutalities of slavery. Whilst memories concerning love and courtship may have been recalled with a certain gloss, there was no reason for the respondent to hide the specific nature of their own or their relatives' courting

experiences from the white interviewer, as these stories rarely focussed on the cruel behaviour of a white master or mistress. Rather, these stories helped to cultivate a sense of self worth for people who had been denied their basic humanity. In retelling such tales, especially to a white person, the African-American may have been engaged in an act of reaffirming their sense of identity and fleshing out the two dimensional image inherent in the term “slave”.

Many of the critiques of the WPA collection have focussed upon the question of whether the narratives accurately reflect the more brutal aspects of slavery, such as whippings and punishments. David Bailey for example, claimed that the WPA narratives were unreliable because they could only reflect on the life of an enslaved child rather than the conditions and experiences of the adult enslaved in the American South. He argued that the WPA narratives could not be trusted as an historical source because the view of slavery that they illustrated was through the eyes of children who had not suffered the indignities and brutalities of the slave system to the same degree as the adult men and women enslaved in the American South.²¹ C. Vann Woodward wrote of the WPA collection that, ‘The slave experience of the majority was, in fact, mainly that of childhood, a period before the full rigors and worst aspects of the slave discipline were

²¹ David Bailey, A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery”, *Journal of Southern History*, 46 (August 1980), No 3, 381-404. Bailey compared a selection of the WPA collection with a sample of longer slave narratives. He argued that the longer slave narratives more accurately depicted the system of slavery because they represent ‘middle aged recollections of the recent past’. Bailey further argued that the WPA collection provided a picture of a more complacent and submissive slave society than do the longer autobiographies. He suggested that there was a lack of emphasis on slave resistance in the WPA collection in comparison to the longer narratives, which documented several instances of overt and active resistance such as running away. However, we must question Bailey’s interpretation of the WPA collection and his definition of “resistance”. As will be discussed in Chapter Six, the WPA collection from North Carolina details numerous episodes of “resistance” such as evading the patrollers, leaving the plantation without a pass and meeting at secret gatherings in the slave quarters. Although these acts did not impact on the system of slavery in the same manner as running away, they must still be considered in terms of daily resistance intended to ameliorate the conditions of enslavement and thus helped the enslaved to retain their humanity.

typically felt and a period more likely than others to be favourably colored in the memory of the aged.’²²

Such critiques concentrate on aspects of the narratives that are not central to the concerns of this research. Indeed, in some respects and in relation to particular subjects the narratives may not be wholly reliable. Respondents may have emphasised how well a former owner had treated them for fear of upsetting the customary racial rules that still structured the American South in the 1930s. However, in discussing aspects of their lives such as close personal relationships, love affairs, and successful courting relationships, formerly enslaved men and women were usually revealing events that could be recalled from memory with pride. They did not have to be hidden beneath the lies that structured racial etiquette in the post-emancipation South.

Certain historians have also pointed to the disproportionate number of men and women represented in the narratives who had been enslaved as domestics in urban settings rather than as field hands on rural plantations and farms, which thus provides an incomplete picture of experiences of enslavement in the South.²³ This does not seem to be the case with the narratives taken from North Carolina. As Chapter Four illustrates a number of the respondents in the WPA narratives referred to field labour and heavy work that they had performed during slavery, including tasks such as splitting logs, ploughing and digging ditches. It is possible to argue that because of the diverse nature of the North Carolinian slave system, which typically involved small farms and plantations, enslaved men and women performed a variety of tasks including both field labour and domestic work, depending on seasonal variations and demands. The labour roles of enslaved men and women in North Carolina may have been much more fluid than in other slave states, where one staple crop formed the backbone of the economy. The types of labour that the enslaved performed may have varied throughout the course

²² C. Vann. Woodward, “History From Slave Sources”, *American Historical Review*, 79 (1974), 470-481, 473.

²³ *Ibid.* 472.

of the year and may have also depended on factors such as age and gender, or the nature of their master or mistress. For example, Eustace Hodges' mother, who had first belonged to Mr McGee in Wake County, had worked as a field hand. She was later sold to a Mr Rufus Jones where she worked as a domestic in the house of her new master.²⁴ The WPA narratives originating from North Carolina do not contain this bias towards the enslaved domestic and therefore may be regarded as more generally representative of enslaved life in North Carolina.

Primarily in response to John Blassingame's refusal to use the WPA narratives as a valid source material, George Rawick, who edited the published version of the WPA collection, questioned why one type of source had to be placed as superior or inferior to another. There was, he argued:

...a serious departure from logic, fairness and coherence in the views of leading scholars of American slavery who have reservations about the slave narrative as sources and who prefer the diaries of planters, fugitive slave advertisements, and essays on the management of slaves published in southern agricultural periodicals.²⁵

The tendency in past scholarship had been to make use of sources originating from the elite white southern community to explain the dynamics of the slave system. Rawick argued that whilst the WPA narratives did have their own distortions and biases they could still reveal much to the historian about the nature and conditions of enslavement in the American South. He suggested that 'The most reliable information can be compiled by asking questions different from those asked by the white interviewers.'²⁶ In the course of this thesis, I have employed the narratives in this manner and have sought to understand aspects of these personal histories in an entirely different manner to those

²⁴ Eustace Hodges, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 447.

²⁵ Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 11, Introduction, xxviii.

²⁶ *Ibid.* xxvii.

who originally performed the interviews for the WPA project. Instead of seeking to understand how slavery destroyed the emotional ties between enslaved men and women, this research employs the WPA narratives in order to ascertain how the enslaved managed their courting relationships in the face of the slave system.

It is also important to remember that the narratives were compiled as part of a project concerning American folklore as a whole rather than slavery *per se*. Whilst David Bailey and others have argued that the recollections contained in the narratives were mainly childhood memories of enslavement, this ignored the strong oral tradition that persisted amongst the enslaved and African-American community following emancipation. Many of the tales told in the WPA collection did not concern the storyteller directly, but were stories that had been told and retold to them concerning their parents, grandparents, a close friend or relative. Within a community that was forbidden to learn to read or write, the spoken word came to take on much more significance, as did the ability to remember a story, so it could be recalled with meaning and depth. Whilst the WPA narratives cannot be understood as “pure” sources and were undoubtedly transformed in the process of telling and retelling they should be perceived as part of the wider tradition of enslaved folklore and storytelling, ‘...the narratives were tapping an oral tradition about slavery among black people, as well as the “memories” of those who had been born as slaves. They provide a link between personal recollection on the one hand and “common knowledge”, lore and folksay on the other, as historical source material.’²⁷

In contrast to my use of the WPA narratives I have made limited use of the longer published autobiographies available.²⁸ The nature of this thesis is concerned with

²⁷ *Ibid.* xix.

²⁸ I have made particular use of the following longer narratives in this research, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, (New York, 1849), republished in Andrews and Gates, *Slave Narratives*; “Aunt Sally or Cross the Way of Freedom: A Narrative of the Slave Life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams of Detroit,” (American Reform Tract and Book Society, 1858), 51, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special*

the intimate and localised nature of enslaved life. Longer autobiographies of the enslaved, published after the 1830s and the rise of the abolitionist movement, were intended to speak to a much wider audience and on a much more political platform than the WPA narratives, and therefore rarely make such explicit references to the courting relationship or courtship behaviour. Whilst these narratives are of invaluable worth to the historian of slavery, my own research has benefited from focussing upon a much more specific and defined collection of narratives that do offer numerous and in-depth discussions of the nature of courtship and the form which these relationships might have taken.²⁹

Longer published autobiographies tended to be written by enslaved men and women who had managed to escape slavery, usually by fleeing the plantation or through the purchase of their freedom.³⁰ Thus, these published works were typically concerned with the nature of this escape and the hazards encountered while trying to reach freedom in the northern states. The published autobiographies of formerly enslaved men and women therefore formed part of a broader discourse of the nineteenth century relating to conceptions of the “free North” and the “slave South” in antebellum America. Where these longer narratives do discuss aspects such as courtship and love I have made use of them within this research, however they do not tend to offer such an extensive discussion of enslaved courtship as do those of the WPA narratives.

Collections Library, Duke University; Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself, (Boston, 1861), republished in Andrews and Gates, Slave Narratives.

²⁹ For a discussion of these longer published narratives see Marion Wilson Sterling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*, (Boston, Mass. GK Hall and Co. 1981).

³⁰ See for example *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*; William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: Or The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*, (William Tweedie, London, 1860); Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. All three narratives can be found in Andrews and Gates, *Slave Narratives*. For other examples see *Narrative of Lunsford Lane, formerly of Raleigh, North Carolina, Embracing an Account of His Early Life, the Redemption by Purchase of Himself, And his Banishment From the Place of his Birth for the Crime of Wearing a Colored Skin*, (Boston, 1842); *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, late a Slave in the United States of America*, (Boston, 1844); Jacob Stroyer, *My Life In the Old South*, (Salem Observer Book and Job Print, 1885). All three of these narratives were obtained in published form from the *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

In comparison, the WPA narratives typically relate the life stories of men and women who were freed on emancipation. They reflect the experiences of those contemporaneously enslaved men and women, rather than runaways or freed people. The narratives contained in the WPA collection may be considered not as “extraordinary” but as personal and intimate accounts. These narratives reflect the lived dynamics and daily experiences of enslaved life, rather than a dramatic story of escape, challenge and freedom. Yet, the WPA narratives are “exceptional” in that they illustrate the ways in which men and women did continue to live in the face of adversity, and it is this aspect of enslaved life with which this thesis is concerned. The WPA narratives allow the historian to consider how enslaved men and women shaped their lives from within the institution of slavery, through negotiation, subversion and resistance. In contrast, while the published narratives of enslaved men and women do provide glimpses of these daily and active challenges they are much more concerned with a political agenda that demanded freedom and the abolition of slavery for all.

1.3: Folklore as an Historical Source

The WPA narratives may then be considered as part of a wider tradition of storytelling amongst the enslaved. This collection provides a valuable insight into the ways in which the enslaved established courting relationships and participated in courtship practices. Folklore was a significant element of the culture of the enslaved, which will be further explored in Chapter Seven of this thesis. This chapter argues that folklore stories of the enslaved provided a space within which the enslaved could explore meanings of love and define the dimensions of the experience of courtship. It also claims that the historian can gain insight into the culture of the enslaved through a consideration of folklore as a source material.

Richard Dorson has argued that the use of folklore tales by the historian serves the important function of supplementing the existing historical record ‘...by providing

coverage of the lives of illiterate or semiliterate people who have no formal record of their experience to balance written narratives.’³¹ Furthermore, the folklore tale also allows for the historian to see beyond formal experiences of enslavement and to begin to understand the intimate aspects of enslaved life. Ralph Ellison suggested that folklore could be used to reveal the entirety of experiences for the black community in the United States: ‘We back away from the chaos of experience and from ourselves, and we depict the humour as well as the horror of our living.’³² The folklore tales that I have used in the course of this thesis illuminate and penetrate the intimate and personal world of the enslaved as these stories relate historical experience, feeling, thought and emotion.

The folklore tales on which I have chosen to concentrate are those contained within the *Uncle Remus* collection edited by Joel Chandler Harris.³³ These tales were published shortly after emancipation and they provide a voluminous anthology of folklore tales derived from the enslaved. Harris was born in 1848 into a poor white family, in the small village of Eatonton in Putnam County, Georgia. Shortly after his birth his father deserted the family, leaving Harris’ mother to bring up her children alone. Harris attended day school until the age of twelve when he was employed on the local Turnworld Plantation for four years. It has been suggested that the stories contained in the *Uncle Remus* collection were obtained during his time here as he laboured with the enslaved men and women, joining them in conversation and participating in various aspects of their culture and customs.³⁴

³¹ Richard M. Dorson, “Ethnohistory and Ethnic Folklore, *Ethnohistory*, 8 (Winter, 1961), 12-30, cited in Gladys Marie Fry, *Night Riders in Black Folk History*, (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1975), 16-17.

³² Ralph Ellison cited in Fry, *Night Riders*, 28.

³³ Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, (1880); *Nights with Uncle Remus*, (1883); *Daddy Jake the Runaway*, (1889); *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, (1893).

³⁴ Stella Brewer Brookes, *Joel Chandler Harris, Folklorist*, (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1950), 9.

Harris' work with the enslaved community at Turnworld enabled him to know their stories and folklore tales intimately. In these years and under the influence and tutelage of Mr Turner, master of Turnworld, Harris developed his talent for writing and was later employed by the newspaper, *The Atlanta Constitution*. It was in the columns of this paper that Uncle Remus made his first appearance as early as 1878.³⁵ Uncle Remus was the fictitious narrator of these folklore tales and his character was based loosely upon three or four enslaved men Harris had met and worked with at Turnworld.³⁶ These short sketches and stories gradually developed into a collection of folklore tales that were later published in 1880 as *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings: The Folklore of the Old Plantation*. Subsequent publications followed until Harris' death in 1908. Thereafter two works were published posthumously.

In working on the *Uncle Remus* collection many stories were forwarded to Harris by others interested in the folklore of the black community. However, Harris maintained that all the tales he received in this manner had already been collected among the enslaved communities of Georgia thus reflecting the common themes of the folklore tales across the southern states.³⁷ Harris admitted the difficulties of obtaining folklore stories from the black community after emancipation, owing to the reluctance of many amongst the newly freed black population to reveal the more intimate aspects of their cultural world to a southern white stranger. His experiences and knowledge of the culture of the enslaved however aided him in his task, '...I have found few Negroes who will acknowledge to a stranger that they know anything of these legends, and yet to relate one is the surest road to their confidence and esteem.'³⁸

³⁵ *Ibid.* 35.

³⁶ Brookes, *Joel Chandler Harris*, 47.

³⁷ Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus*, Introduction, x.

³⁸ *Ibid.* xi.

Harris wrote the Uncle Remus stories in a third person narrative. He created a dialogue within the books between the two fictional characters of Uncle Remus, an elderly enslaved black man who was the main storyteller, and the young son of the plantation owner. Additional storytellers such as Daddy Jack and Aunt Tempy occasionally joined the two characters along with extra members of the audience such as Tildy, the house servant. Nevertheless, the central relationship between Uncle Remus and the little boy formed the backdrop to the telling of the tales. It was essential to the meaning and significance of the folklore stories as the little boy implored Uncle Remus to tell him about *The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story* or *How Mr Rabbit Grossly Deceived Mr Fox*.³⁹ In the course of the tale the little boy often interjected, questioning or laughing at certain events, and thus maintaining the type of call and response dialogue that is typical of storytelling within the African and African-American communities. Uncle Remus played the role of the storyteller who employed wisdom, wit and wonderment in the stories he related to the little boy.

The *Uncle Remus* collection provides a comprehensive source for those interested in the folklore stories of the enslaved. Although the tales were mainly gathered from the larger rice and cotton plantations of the lower south, independent research has verified that such stories were common among members of the enslaved community, across the slave-holding states, including North Carolina.⁴⁰ In using the *Uncle Remus* collection as an historical source we encounter similar problems to those met with the WPA narratives. The tales related in the collection were gathered from formerly enslaved men and women yet the complete anthology represents Harris' own (white) voice retelling these stories through the fictitious character of Uncle Remus.

³⁹ For the "Wonderful Tar-Baby Story" and the story of "How Mr Rabbit Grossly Deceives Mr Fox" see Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, 23-25, 34-39.

⁴⁰ See for example Emma Backus, "Animal Tales From North Carolina", *Journal of American Folklore*, 13 (1898), 284-292; Margaret Devereux, *Plantation Sketches*, (Privately Printed at Riverside Press, Cambridge, 16 November 1906); Elsie Clews Parson, "Tales From Guilford County, North Carolina", *Journal of American Folklore*, 30 (1917).

Furthermore, the original stories may have been altered or distorted by the folklorists who recorded these narratives and forwarded them to Harris. The reader can never be sure whose views and opinions are represented in the tales as they are reinterpreted in the process of telling and retelling.

The fact that the tales contained in the *Uncle Remus* collection also emerged in a similar form and content across the former slave states suggests that these were not a product of Harris' own imagination, but were a fundamental aspect of the culture that developed in the quarters of the enslaved. There are however other aspects that should be considered when interpreting these tales and the meanings they convey to its audience. Factors such as the age and gender of the original storyteller would have impacted on the structure of the tales and the definitions and meanings contained within them. Mineke Schipper has argued that in certain African societies the gender of the narrator of the folklore tale has a profound effect on the representations of men and women contained in the narratives. She suggested that in those tales that were related by men, women were generally depicted negatively and the stories acted as a warning to men that they must continuously protect themselves and their property against the intentions of their wife.⁴¹ The construction of gender differences in these folklore tales represented for Schipper an attempt to veil the ideological power struggles in which one party benefited from the preservation of existing differences, while the other constantly sought to reduce them. 'These conflicting interests are expressed in the different ways in which male and female authors tell the same story from oral tradition.'⁴²

Due to the nature of the *Uncle Remus* collection it is difficult to verify the gender of the original narrator of the individual tales. Yet if the structure and content of the stories are examined it is clear that in their published version they were being told

⁴¹ Mineke Schipper, *Imagining Insiders: Africa and the Question of Belonging*, (London, New York, Cassell, 1999), Chapter Seven, "Emerging From the Shadows: Changing Patterns in Gender Matters", 130.

⁴² *Ibid.* 131.

from a male perspective. Even when Uncle Remus' audience included Aunt Tempy or Tildy, the tales still contained a masculine bias, which was reflected in the representations of women in these narratives. As Chapter Seven argues, the depiction of female characters in the folklore stories was particularly negative. The masculine characteristics embodied by Brer Rabbit, such as wit and cunning, were celebrated, and offered as an alternative identity for enslaved men. In comparison, women were either cast as passive spectators or were characterised in terms that ranged from stupid and naïve, to wicked and evil. The tales operated as words of warning to men to be on their guard against male competitors in the courtship arena and at the same time to be aware of the malevolent intentions of women in the world of love and romance. Thus, the *Uncle Remus* tales should be understood as reflecting particular masculine ideals and values regarding the nature of the courting relationship and the roles of men and women within the processes of courtship.

1.4: Archival Material Used in the Thesis

As well as using the WPA narratives and published collections of folklore I have also drawn on archival material from the Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library at Duke University, North Carolina, and The Southern Historical Collection and Southern Folklore Collection, housed in the Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. This material was obtained during a three-month research visit to North Carolina during my second year of research. In order to gain an understanding of the context in which the courtship of the enslaved took place, the views of white southern elites have been considered as an integral part of my research project. I have used a wide variety of source materials emanating from elite white southerners, although as the objective of this research is ultimately concerned with the intimate and the personal, diaries and letters form the majority of the archival materials cited in this research.

John Blassingame has argued that only by considering source material that derives from both white and black members of southern society can we begin to build a comprehensive picture of plantation life. He wrote that ‘neither the whites nor the blacks had a monopoly on truth, had rended the veil cloaking the life of the other, or had seen clearly the pain and joy bounded by color and caste.’⁴³ For the purpose of this research, I have considered it fundamental to understand the role that the slave-owning classes played in the courtship of the enslaved, through the eyes of both the enslaved themselves and their white masters and mistress. I have also considered the historiography of white romantic love and used historical sources from the white slave-owning elite to ascertain how the enslaved might be written into the existing literature concerning love and emotion in the American South.

Using sources derived from both slave-owners and enslaved individuals allows me to reflect on the ways in which the enslaved could engage in courting practices in the context of a society governed by the system of slavery. In particular I contrast the slave-owning elite’s perceptions of their slave’s relationships – what they said about them, how they viewed them in the context of slavery and how they understood their own actions in creating and sustaining such relationships – with the views that the enslaved themselves had of these intimate unions. As Chapter Three argues previous work concerning the emotional depths of southern life has privileged the voices of the white elite and subsequently the emotional experiences of the enslaved have largely gone unheard. Moreover, and as Chapter Two will discuss, early historical accounts of slavery in the American South failed to consider the significance of love and emotions in the lives of the enslaved. More recent historical research has begun to remedy such neglect, however, as the next Chapter will discuss there are still significant gaps in the current historiography, which require attention.

⁴³ John Blassingame, [ed.], *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies*, (Baton Rouge, London, Louisiana State University Press, 1977), ixv.

Chapter Two

Conspicuous by its Absence? The Place of Love and Emotions in the Historiography of the Enslaved

The current literature concerning courtship and love amongst enslaved couples is particularly limited. The historiography has shied away from focussing upon the romantic or affective nature of relationships that developed between enslaved men and women on the plantations of the Old South. Instead, the family has become the space within which enslaved relationships have been understood.¹ Whilst an historical analysis of the enslaved family has proven to be of invaluable worth to the larger historical account of enslaved life in the American South, it has largely failed to consider the emotional spirit and motives that governed the establishment and management of intimate relationships for the enslaved. It is this significant gap in current historical understandings of enslaved life that this thesis seeks to highlight and consequently begin to fill. This chapter will consider this historiography in order to illustrate the themes that have emerged in discussions of the enslaved family. It will also reflect on the absence in this historiography of primary concepts such as love and courtship.

2.1: Redefining The Enslaved Family

The seminal work of Herbert Gutman located the family as a central institution in the lives of the black community both during enslavement and in the post-

¹ There has been a large amount of research concerning the enslaved family since the 1970s. The most significant of these include, Justin Labinjohn, "The Sexual Life of the Oppressed: An Examination of the Family Life of Ante-Bellum Slaves", *Phylon*, 35 (1974), No 4; Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1976); Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*; Steven Brown, "Sexuality and the Slave Community", *Phylon*, 42 (Spring 1981), No 1; Cheryll Ann Cody, *Slave Demography and Family Formation: A Community Study of the Ball Family Plantations, 1720-1896*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1982); Orville Vernon Burton, *In my Father's House are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina*, (Chapel Hill, London, University of North Carolina, 1985); Anne Malone, *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth Century Louisiana*, (Chapel Hill, London, University of North Carolina Press, 1992); William Dusingerre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps*, (Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996); Hudson, *To Have and To Hold*; Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1999); West, *Love and Affection, Exploitation and Resistance*.

emancipation era.² Gutman made two central arguments in his research. Firstly he posited that the two-parent, nuclear and co-residential family was the typical domestic arrangement during and after enslavement. This was in response to suggestions that the primary family form amongst enslaved and contemporary black Americans was that of the matrifocal family, which was typically characterised by absent fathers, and the experience of lone parenting by black women, who were forced to provide the main financial and emotional support for other family members. He also stressed the importance of fictive kin within black society, which bound unrelated members of the community through ties of reciprocity and solidarity.

The second fundamental point Gutman sought to establish was that the organization and structure of the black family was not a reflection of norms and values imposed on them by the white planter class, but had instead developed out of specific historical experiences, based upon a West Africa heritage and subsequent enslavement in the Americas. Thus Gutman stated that ‘slave belief and behaviour at the emancipation were the consequence of a recurrent action between accumulating historical experiences (culture) as transmitted over time through an adaptive slave-family and kinship system and the changing slave society in which the slaves lived.’³

Gutman’s work was part of a debate in the 1960s and 1970s concerning the nature of the modern black family. This debate can be traced back to the 1930s, when E. Franklin Frazier argued that emancipation had caused a crisis in the development of black society. ‘When the yoke of slavery was lifted the drifting masses were left without any restraint upon their vagrant impulses and wild desires’, he wrote. ‘The old intimacy between master and slave, upon which the moral order of the slave regime had rested, was destroyed forever.’⁴ Frazier extended this argument into the realm of black family

² Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*.

³ *Ibid.* 34.

⁴ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, (New York, University of Chicago Press, 1939), 78.

life, which he characterised as fragmentary, casual and precarious. Without the bonds of slave and master, he argued, the black population had been left to drift aimlessly with no point of anchorage or voice of authority to weight them down. Accordingly for Frazier black culture lacked any sense of tradition, custom or positive institutional life from which a sense of stability and continuity might have emerged.

Frazier's work resurfaced and was built upon in the context of the political debate concerning the nature of the modern black family in 1960s America. Daniel Moynihan's report, *The Negro Family in America: The Case for National Action* (1965), argued that high unemployment rates amongst urban black populations had led to increased family fragmentation and a rise in the number of female-headed households. This in turn had resulted in a matrifocal community that lacked any defined positions of status for men, such as "father" or "husband", and therefore offered no positive role models for male children. This type of family organisation was regarded as deviant from the idealised norm in the Western world, that of the nuclear family. Moynihan argued that the "pathological" nature of the modern black family could be read backwards in time. He identified the causes of this social dislocation in historical processes, especially that of enslavement and subsequent emancipation:

In its lasting effects on individuals and their children...American slavery was indescribably worse than any recorded servitude, ancient or modern...the slave household often developed a fatherless matrifocal pattern...At the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure...it was by destroying the Negro family that white America broke the will of the Negro people...Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American.⁵

⁵ The Moynihan Report, cited in Gutman, *The Black Family*, 462.

Moynihan's thesis invited controversy and Gutman's voice was one of the loudest in the defence of the black family. Gutman pointed to numerous elements within the lives of the enslaved that demonstrated their commitment to a definite family structure and the development of an independent and autonomous culture concerning family issues. Gutman employed numerous quantitative sources in order to support his argument. Manuscript census returns from numerous southern cities and rural areas, dating back to 1855 were used to analyse the nature of enslaved families. The Freedmen's Bureau records provided data regarding the marriages and households of formerly enslaved men and women in 1865 and 1866. Genealogies of the enslaved were taken from plantation records primarily in the deeper South or tidewater Virginia where there were a dense number of enslaved blacks, for North Carolina only the records from the Bennehan-Cameron plantation, located in the Piedmont, were used, to enable Gutman to consider the development of enslaved family life on the plantation.

Using this data and a more limited collection of qualitative sources, Gutman argued that the double-headed kin related household was the predominant family form amongst the black community during enslavement and into emancipation. In the spring of 1866 for example, nearly 20,000 North Carolinian men and women who had previously been enslaved in the state registered their marriages with the county clerks following the order for registration of all continuing marriages amongst those who had previously been enslaved. This amounted to about 14 per cent of North Carolina's entire adult population of enslaved men and women in 1860. A significant number of these marriages were recorded as having lasted over many years, implying that enslaved couples were able to create and maintain permanent and lasting relationships. In Halifax County, 163 marriages were registered in 1866. Of these marriages, thirteen were between couples who had been together for more than thirty years and thirty-three for

more than twenty years.⁶ For Gutman these figures illustrated the existence of “direct models” making it possible for the enslaved community to pass on autonomous conceptions of marital, familial and kin obligations.⁷

It also demonstrated for Gutman the significance of marriage in the moral structure of the black community. Whilst both Frazier and Moynihan had argued that black society was characterised by loose sexual morals, deriving from the nature of plantation life during enslavement, Gutman attempted to illustrate that what had been read as sexual promiscuity amongst the enslaved, was in fact a significant and defined element of enslaved culture. Gutman argued that whilst prenuptial intercourse and childbirth before marriage were a common feature of enslaved life, this usually preceded a settled union between two consenting individuals. Gutman claimed that premarital sexual liaisons were not frowned upon within the enslaved community and couples commonly married after the birth of a child. Gutman further argued that this element of enslaved practice distinguished enslaved norms from prevalent Victorian concepts of morality and chastity.⁸

The WPA narratives from North Carolina do not refer to the sexual element of the courting relationship. It is questionable whether formerly enslaved men and women would be willing to discuss this particular aspect of their lives with the white interviewing staff on the project. Therefore it is difficult for the historian to consider whether the practice of premarital sex was a common feature of enslaved courtship in antebellum North Carolina. Certain respondents mentioned the birth of a child shortly after a marriage ceremony, thus lending support to Gutman’s argument that pre-marital sex was a distinct feature of enslaved life in the antebellum South. However, this does

⁶ “Manuscript Marriage Registers and Negro Cohabitation Certificates”, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina, cited in Gutman, *The Black Family*, 15.

⁷ Gutman, *The Black Family*, 17.

⁸ Gutman, *The Black Family*, Chapter Two, “Because She Was my Cousin”, 45-100.

not indicate a wholesale rejection of ideas concerning sexual integrity by enslaved men and women. As Chapter Five of this thesis discusses, the enslaved were guided by distinct concepts of morality and chastity, which they carried into the post-emancipation period and which were integral to the courtship experiences of their children. Despite Gutman's argument then that the cultural world of the enslaved was entirely distinct from that of southern white culture, it is necessary to keep in mind the fact that the norms and values that governed the enslaved cannot be entirely divorced from those of white society in the slave-holding South.⁹

The notion of a distinct and autonomous set of morals and standards amongst the enslaved was central to Gutman's thesis. He cited elements of enslaved familial experiences that for him illustrated the existence of continuities adapted from the heritage of the enslaved in West Africa. For Gutman, the stress by the enslaved on kinship itself was a significant element that reflected older West African customs. 'The adaptive kin networks that developed among the slaves were not "copies" of earlier West African networks but had their roots in antecedent beliefs that kinship was the normal idiom of social relations.'¹⁰ Gutman also argued that practices such as naming patterns, religious beliefs and the exogamous nature of enslaved unions could all be linked to cultural practices in West Africa, and were quite distinct from the rituals that governed the relationships of the white planter class.¹¹ Avoidance of first cousin marriages amongst the enslaved was, Gutman argued, testimony to the distinct nature of the morals governing enslaved familial and marital experiences. This particular aspect of enslaved marital patterns did contrast with those of the slave-owning classes in the

⁹ Gutman's disregard for the degree of cultural interdependence in the context of the antebellum South will be discussed at greater length in the course of this chapter.

¹⁰ Gutman, *The Black Family*, 197.

¹¹ For a critique of Gutman's argument that enslaved families were based around extended kinship, rules of exogamy and adaptive kinship networks see Wayne K. Durrill, "Slavery, Kinship and Dominance: The Black Community at Somerset Place Plantation, 1786-1860", *Slavery and Abolition*, 13 (August 1992), No 2, 1-19.

American South. Historians such as Jane Turner-Censer have illustrated the fact that the white slave-owning elite in North Carolina often established intimate relationships that were endogamous, and particularly popular was marriage between cousins.¹² Thus, it is possible to suggest that certain aspects of courtship practices and familial formation amongst the enslaved did derive from a distinct and independent set of values.

Gutman also cited naming practices as a custom that reflected the autonomy of enslaved cultural practices. In the late eighteenth century there were seven established slave families on the Bennehan-Cameron plantation, Orange County, North Carolina. Within these seven families, sons were named for fathers in three cases, and grandsons for their paternal or maternal grandfather in three others.¹³ Turner-Censer has argued that these naming patterns were also common amongst the white planter classes.¹⁴ However, Gutman argued that there was a special stress within this practice for the enslaved on celebrating the role of the father in the enslaved household. This role was largely denied for the enslaved through a legal framework that tied a child's inherited status to its mother.¹⁵ According to Gutman, '...Naming a child for its father therefore

¹² See Jane Turner-Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Children*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 86.

¹³ Cameron Family Papers, "The Southern Historical Collection", University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, cited in Gutman, *The Black Family*, 190.

¹⁴ Turner-Censer, *North Carolina Planters*, Chapter Two "Heaven's Best Gifts: Young Children and Family Life."

¹⁵ For a discussion of the legal framework that developed in the American South and the regulation of sexuality see Catherine Clinton, "Southern Dishonour: Flesh, Blood, Rape and Bondage, in Carol Bleser, [ed.], *In Joy and In Sorrow. Women, Family and Marriage in the Victorian South 1830-1900*, (London, Open University Press, 1991); Peter Bardaglio, "Rape and the Law in the Old South: calculated to Excite Indignation in Every Heart", *Journal of Southern History*, LX (November 1994), No4, 749-772; Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Peter Bardaglio, "Shamefull Matches: The Regulation of Interracial Sex and Marriage in the South Before 1900" in Martha Hodes, [ed.], *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, New York, New York University Press, 1999); Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina*, (Ithaca, London, Cornell University Press, 2002).

confirmed the dyadic tie and gave it an assured historical continuity that complemented the close contact that bound the child to its mother.’¹⁶

In addition, Gutman saw these naming patterns as indicative of the persistence of some elements of West African beliefs amongst the enslaved. Male children were not named solely for their father, but also both male and female children were given the name of another blood relative or a sibling who had previously died. Gutman argued that these practices affirmed the individual’s links with their wider network of relations and kin and thus he suggested that they could be linked to West African traditions concerning reincarnation and rebirth of the spirit. For example he argued that in West African thought systems it was widely held that ‘...the first infant born in a family after the decease of a member was the same individual come back, just as they saw a young moon after the old one was gone...’¹⁷

2.2: ‘De preacher married ‘em up good an’ tight just lak he done de white folks...’¹⁸: The Question of Cultural Exchange

Gutman’s work must be read as a response to the Moynihan report. The stress Gutman placed on the notion of an autonomous and distinct code of conduct that governed the familial experiences of the enslaved represented the antithesis of the arguments advanced by Moynihan and supported by earlier works such as Frazier’s. Yet in attempting to move the debate away from a notion of “victimhood” and to provide the enslaved (and indeed, the black community) with a sense of independence and worth, Gutman’s historical analysis was lacking in many areas.

¹⁶ Gutman, *The Black Family*, 190.

¹⁷ “Memoir of Mrs Chloe Spear, A Native of Africa, Died in 1815, aged 65, By a Lady of Boston”, cited in Gutman, *The Black Family*, 193.

¹⁸ Richard C. Moring, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 140.

In refuting the notion that enslaved culture was in any way a product of the mimesis of white culture or planter imposed arrangements, Gutman overlooked the context in which enslaved familial relationships were established and developed.¹⁹ Intimate relationships and familial structures were the result of negotiation and resistance between the enslaved and the slave-owner. In prioritising the autonomy of enslaved culture Gutman appeared to neglect the social system in which this culture developed. Gutman's rejection of the notion that white culture may have influenced the development of enslaved ideals and practices also limited his analysis. Southern white culture interacted intensely with that of the enslaved and free blacks and this process was far more fluid than Gutman allowed for in his analysis. Just as the enslaved sought to sanction their relationships through a marriage ceremony performed by a preacher, as was the norm for their white master and mistress, so too, for instance, might have white women adapted herbal remedies to cure numerous ailments or ease the burden of childbirth, from enslaved women. Thus, white and black culture were never completely isolated from each other in the American South.

In addition to this critique was the argument that Gutman had envisaged "culture" as monolithic. Black and white culture were defined as distinct from each other and homogenous in nature. Yet black culture incorporated a large minority of free blacks in the American South, a category of black people whose material and social experiences differed markedly in many respects from those of the enslaved. The presence of free blacks in North Carolina would have added numerous and varied elements to the value system that structured black culture in the antebellum South.²⁰ As Chapter Four of this thesis illustrates the enslaved community itself was divided by

¹⁹ See review article by Vernon Burton and Joseph L. Love, "The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925, By Herbert G. Gutman", *Journal of Social History*, 11 (1978), No 3, 430-32.

²⁰ There was a sizable minority of free blacks in North Carolina during the antebellum period. This thesis has not concentrated on the romantic relationships that were established between the enslaved and free black population. However, there are limited examples of such affairs. In particular, see Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Chapter Seven, "The Lover".

sharp distinctions of status based on factors such as age, skills and gender. Individuals interacted with whites and blacks on several levels, thus shaping their lived experiences and wider world-views. Notions of class and status divided white culture too. Poor whites interacted with the enslaved and free blacks in numerous social and work settings and it is fair to assume that various practices and beliefs passed between all these diverse groups.²¹

Gutman's focus on the cultural heritage of West Africa also established an image of homogenous family structures and cultural beliefs. His desire to refute the Moynihan thesis created an arena in which he often made claims linking practices in West Africa to those of the enslaved community in the American South, claims that were supported only tentatively by his sources. For example, while stressing the impact of West African religious beliefs on the structure of the enslaved family, Gutman ignored the influence that Christianity had upon the value system of the enslaved community and the part it played in governing the choices made by the enslaved.²²

One illustration of the effect of Christianity was the number of enslaved couples who took the opportunity to sanction their union by means of the local preacher. Richard Moring, who had been enslaved in Wake County, remembered that when there was a wedding on the plantation it was a large affair with special significance attached to the figure of the religious man, 'De preacher married 'em up good an' tight just lak he done de white folks...'²³ The marriage ceremony meant nothing in legal terms for the enslaved. They were not, as Richard Moring suggested, *married up good and tight*, as

²¹ For a discussion of interracial sexual relationships in colonial North Carolina see Fischer, *Suspect Relations*. For a discussion of interracial sexual relationships in antebellum North Carolina see Bynum, *Unruly Women*. For a discussion of interracial social and sexual relationships in antebellum Georgia see Tim Lockley, "Crossing the Racial Divide: Interracial Sex in Antebellum Savannah", *Slavery and Abolition*, 18 (December 1997), No 3, 159-173; Lockley, *Lines in the Sand*.

²² See Burton and Love, "The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925, By Herbert G. Gutman", 432.

²³ Richard C. Moring, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 140.

they couple could be separated through sale or estate transfer. Certainly a more “formal” marriage ceremony conducted by a preacher may have forced the slave-owner to recognise the validity of the relationship, and consequently they may have been more reluctant to separate such couples through sale. Enslaved couples would not have been unaware of this and may in part, have sought to sanction their union through the preacher for this very reason. Yet, it also seems that enslaved couples sought to emulate white cultural practices in the process of confirming their familial relationships. The idea that the preacher’s blessing signified something more tangible to the enslaved because he also presided over the Christian weddings of elite white people reveals much regarding the cultural interplay between black and white culture in the American South.²⁴

Aside from this cultural interaction with the white slave-owning elite, the enslaved and free black population would also have maintained social contact with members of the white labouring poor. As Tim Lockley has noted in Lowcountry Georgia, ‘In areas such as the workplace, dramshop and brothel, where there was no reason for maintaining racial distinctions, racial lines could become blurred and permeable.’²⁵ In North Carolina enslaved men and women worked alongside the labouring white population on the plantation and interacted with them on a daily basis in urban centres such as Wilmington. Elias Thomas recalled that his master, Baxter Thomas, from Chatham County, hired both men and women of the poor white class to work on the plantation. Elias suggested that the respect shown by the master towards the poor white community shaped the attitude of the enslaved as well. He remarked that ‘...We thought well of the poor white neighbours...’²⁶ Such associations laid the basis

²⁴ The interaction between the culture of the enslaved and the slave-holding elite in the arena of courtship, especially as it was represented in the marriage ceremony, will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

²⁵ Lockley, *Lines in the Sand*, 29.

²⁶ Elias Thomas, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 345.

for cultural practices and values to be passed between these two sectors of southern society, each influencing the other to a certain degree. Thus, the lines between the world of the enslaved and that of the free, both black and white, were not as tightly drawn as Gutman's analysis suggested.

Gutman did at least appear to have been aware of the links that might be made between the cultural practices of the enslaved and free populations of the slave-holding South. For example, Gutman suggested that the practice of jumping the broomstick, which many enslaved couples undertook as part of the marriage ritual, might be linked to a specific and distinct set of values from within the enslaved community that were rooted in West African beliefs in magic, witchcraft and the spirit world. At the same time however, he acknowledged that this custom was also found amongst railroad construction workers in nineteenth century Britain and poor white couples across the American South.²⁷ Despite this, and in his desire to defend the cultural autonomy of the enslaved and to stress the cultural links between the enslaved and West Africa, Gutman failed to expand this discussion regarding the processes of cultural exchange and interplay in the lives of white and black communities in the antebellum American South.

Gutman's research represented an attempt to defend the cultural integrity of the enslaved and remove the label of "victim" from historical understandings of the enslaved experience. Yet in the process of reasserting the cultural autonomy of the enslaved his analysis tended to emphasise the elements that could be read as "African" in form while ignoring the ways in which social and cultural relations in the South were interdependent and interacted on numerous levels. In prioritising the West African roots of enslaved culture Gutman laid far too much stress on continuities and retention and not enough on the context and circumstances in which enslaved relationships and familial forms developed.

²⁷ Gutman, *The Black Family*, 277.

The emphasis laid upon continuities with West Africa has probably hampered any serious historical research into the internal dynamics of enslaved relationships. This is primarily because of the lack of attention paid to such themes in the historiography concerning West African familial practices. Gutman's argument concerning the West African heritage of the enslaved and their cultural links to the past had already been established in the work of Melville Herskovits, who had argued in *The Myth of the Negro Past* that the enslaved were able to retain their West Africa culture on the North American mainland.²⁸

Herskovits had claimed that a generalised West African worldview and underlying customs and values were central to the culture of the enslaved in the Americas. According to Herskovits the similarity of tribal groups at the heart of the slave trading area in eighteenth century West Africa allowed for certain aspects of this culture to be widely understood and thus dispersed and developed by the enslaved on the North American mainland. The Ashanti tribe of the Gold Coast, the Dahomeans, the Yoruba of western Nigeria and the Bini of eastern Nigeria collectively represented for Herskovits the main cultures that were exported to the Americas. These societies were all agricultural, relying on co-operative labour as the basis for production. They were, he argued, highly centralised societies with institutions that regulated and ensured the security of community life. The kinship systems of these societies were fundamentally sanctioned by the ancestral cult and marriage was organised and regulated through clan membership and by the elders of the extended family and clan.²⁹

For Herskovits the cultural homogeneity of the West Africa coast had allowed the enslaved on the North American mainland to retain certain values even when forcibly removed from their homeland and separated from their kinsmen. Herskovits' analysis thus presented "West African culture" as essentially homogenous. Gutman had

²⁸ Melville S. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1958).

²⁹ *Ibid.* Chapter III, "African Cultural Heritage."

tried to move his analysis away from such a holistic vision of West African culture. However, he also employed the concept of a West African worldview in terms of kinship relationships and familial arrangements, which itself implied a sense of homogeneity within West African cultural practices.

Gutman positioned his own research as an extension of Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's work, which offered a sophisticated revision of Herskovits' analysis concerning the cultural independence of the enslaved in the American South.³⁰ They argued that '...No group, no matter how well equipped or how free to choose, can transfer its way of life and the accompanying beliefs and values intact from one locale to another.'³¹ Instead of concentrating upon sociological and concrete realities they focussed upon the values and processes at the heart of cultural construction. They claimed that Herskovits' model of West African retentions was too limited as it 'mask[ed]...the processes implicit in both the continuities and discontinuities between Africa and the Americas. To assume slaves in one colony were somehow culturally committed to one or another path of development evades the empirical question of what really happened and masks the central theoretical issue of how culture changes.'³²

For Mintz and Price the central task for the imported enslaved Africans in the Americas was the creation of institutions that would prove responsive to the needs of everyday life under the limitations that enslavement imposed. These institutions were created within the boundaries of enslavement yet according to Mintz and Price, they remained separate from the institutions of their white masters and mistresses. 'The institutions that emerged in any early slave population may be viewed as a sort of framework in which cultural materials could be employed, standardized and transformed into new tradition...[The] task must then become to delineate the process by which

³⁰ Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*, (Massachusetts, Beacon Press, 1976)

³¹ *Ibid.* 1.

³² *Ibid.* 18.

cultural materials that were retained from Africa, could contribute to the institution building slaves undertook to inform condition with coherence, meaning and some measure of autonomy.³³

For Gutman, one of these vital *cultural materials* retained from West Africa and that contributed to the creation of institutions by the enslaved was kinship and family structure. However the literature concerning West African familial practices, with which enslaved customs were being linked, was particularly sparse. Lucy Mair's research from the 1950s, for example, made much of the practice of polygamy as one of the outstanding features of West African marital customs. For Mair, polygamy was an ideal in a social system where mutual co-operation was the key to social relations and imperative to the obligations of kinship and marriage.³⁴ However, missing from her analysis was a consideration of the meanings that individuals attached to such practices and the degree of emotional investment made in a marriage. Therefore, assessments of enslaved cultural practices based upon a notion of West African cultural continuities has focussed upon form and content rather than emotions and experience.

Moreover, it is vital to remember that the familial relationships of the enslaved were established in a quite a different context from that of West Africa during the nineteenth century, and Gutman assumed more than he was able to prove regarding the links between these two cultural worlds. For example, there are few references in the WPA narratives to a form of familial relationships amongst the enslaved that might be compared to the practice of polygamy. Andrew Boone remarked that his father had several children because he had several women besides Andrew's mother. He explained that '...Mollie and Lila Lassiter, two sisters were also his women. Dese women was

³³ *Ibid.* 41. (emphasis added).

³⁴ Lucy P. Mair, "African Marriage and Social Change", in Arthur Phillips, [ed], *Survey of African Marriage and Social Change*, (Published for the African Institute by Oxford University Press, 1953), 1.

given to him an' no udder man was allowed to have anything to do wid 'em.'³⁵ It is necessary to question the meanings and power relations that structured such arrangements for the enslaved. For instance, who *gave* Mollie and Lila to Andrew's father and who enforced the rule that *no other man was allowed to have anything to do with them*? We cannot know with certainty whether the relationship between Andrew Boone's father and Mollie and Lila was consensual or the product of an enforced arrangement by the slave-owner, and Andrew Boone provides no indication of how the individuals involved viewed this arrangement. The practice of polygamy may well have persisted amongst the enslaved on the plantations of the American South. However, we must express caution in assuming that these relationships were necessarily derived from West African familial practices, rather than the outcome of the mechanisms of control and authority that structured the southern slave system.

Anthropological research such as Mair's also lacked any definite sense of chronology and West African history was thus painted as seamless and unchanging over time. Analysis of West African marital customs and family forms were typically concerned with the structural elements of these processes and lacked any awareness of the individuals involved or the meanings and values derived from such customs, which is a prime interest of this thesis in the context of slavery in the South. As Mintz and Price argued in 1976, 'anthropologists have given relatively little attention to deeper level aspects of African heritage...[This] leads to a somewhat mechanical view of culture and de-emphasises the processes of change and diversification.'³⁶ The research available to Gutman on which he based his analysis offered a limited interpretation of the emotional dynamics of West African familial practices. Consequently he was perhaps able to offer only tentative assumptions regarding the nature of the links

³⁵ Andrew Boone, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 135-136.

³⁶ Mintz and Price, *The Birth of African American Culture*, 13.

between West African culture and the customs and rituals of the enslaved in the American South.

2.3: The Sexualisation of the Enslaved in Elite White Discourse

Notwithstanding these critiques, one of the major contributions of Gutman's work was that it enabled the historian to understand the nature of the enslaved family. In particular, historians learned that enslaved relationships were neither simply products of the enforced decisions of slave-owners, nor casual and spontaneous affairs driven by the uncontrollable sexual desires of the enslaved. Instead familial bonds between the enslaved came to be acknowledged as experiences from which they were able to derive personal fulfilment and a degree of emotional autonomy. In his research, Gutman employed qualitative sources such as the WPA narratives - which form the basis of this thesis - and therefore he did begin to provide an insight into the emotional processes at work in the personal relationships of the enslaved.

Previous scholarly understandings of the enslaved had stressed their inability to create stable and secure relationships, both because of the nature of the slave system itself and the assumed innate characteristics of enslaved men and women. Frazier had implied in his analysis of the black family in the post-emancipation period that separation during enslavement, through sale or estate transfers, meant that the enslaved were unable to maintain monogamous, committed relationships. For Frazier this explained why the contemporary black family in the United States was so "dysfunctional". This was a recurrent theme in the historiography of the enslaved family. Even John Blassingame argued in his earlier research that '...many of the plantations were so large that it was impossible for masters to supervise both the labour and the sex lives of their slaves. Sexual morality, often imperfectly taught (or violated by whites with impunity), drifted through a heavy veil of ignorance to the quarters.

Consequently, for a majority of slaves, sex was a natural urge frequently fulfilled by casual liaisons.’³⁷

Sexuality had been central to the discussion concerning the black family in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Frazier ‘...Promiscuous sexual relations and constant changing of spouses became the rule with the demoralised elements in the freed Negro population.’³⁸ Frazier viewed the separation of husbands and wives during slavery as the cause of the alleged confusion of black men and women concerning marital commitment and fidelity, in the post-emancipation era. Frazier’s analysis upheld white norms of sexual morality that promoted the monogamous marriage and nuclear family as the ideal against which any other form of family organisation should be judged. In addition, whilst Frazier condemned the system of slavery for its lasting effects on the behaviour and beliefs of the black community, he himself operated within a discourse that was itself born out of slavery. He articulated stereotypes of the black man and woman that had been fundamental to the establishment, maintenance, and reproduction of the system of slavery on the North American mainland. Such assumptions represented black men and women as fundamentally sexual rather than rational beings, who were incapable of experiencing emotions such as love.

These ideas concerning the essential sexuality of black men and women can be traced back several hundred years before Frazier wrote about them. I shall discuss these notions as they related to black men at greater length below, but I will firstly outline the ways in which the black female body and sexual identity were constructed in the European male’s imagination. The travel accounts of sixteenth and seventeenth century male travellers, to the Americas and Africa, contributed to an emerging discourse on the nature of black womanhood and a view of blackness *per se*. The African woman and her Amerindian counterpart became the central figures in a racialised discourse that created

³⁷ Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 82.

³⁸ Frazier, *The Negro Family in the US*, 79.

and defined the borders of European national identities and white superiority. ‘...Through the rubric of monstrously “raced” Amerindian and African women, Europeans found a means to articulate shaping perceptions of themselves as religiously, culturally and phenotypically superior to those black or brown persons they sought to define.’³⁹

In 1646, the English writer Thomas Browne suggested that ‘...blackness and beauty were mutually dependent, each relying on the other as antithetical proof of each one’s existence.’⁴⁰ The black female figure was continually contrasted to that which was white and thus considered as superior and beautiful. In the travel accounts of European men, African women were defined through and by their sexual identity, which was represented as animalistic and grotesque. European observers pointed to what they perceived as African women’s alleged capacity for easy childbirth and breastfeeding, and this would become of increasing significance over time as it fitted her effortlessly for productive and reproductive labour in the context of New World slavery. Black women’s breasts in particular came to signify their natural propensity for reproduction and childrearing. Abolitionist John Atkins, writing during the early eighteenth century in Guinea, used an image of the black female body that linked the African race and black women in particular with connotations of animality. He wrote, ‘...Childing, and their breasts always pendulous, stretches them to so unseemly a length and Bigness that some...could suckle over their shoulders...’⁴¹ African women were then characterised as animal-like in form and ideally suited to the task of physical labour and reproduction.

Along with this belief in her heightened fecundity, African women were also seen to possess a rampant and corrupt sexual appetite. Long before historians such as

³⁹ Jennifer Morgan, “Some Could Suckle Over their Shoulder: Male Travellers, Female Bodies and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 54 (January 1997), 167-192, 168.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 167.

⁴¹ John Atkins, cited in *Ibid.* 188.

Frazier had advocated the notion of a deviant black sexuality, European men had looked to sexual practices in Africa as being indicative of the corruption and savagery of the black race. English travel writer John Mandeville wrote that in Africa ‘...the folk lie all naked...and the women have no shame of the men...they wed there no wives, for all the women there be common...’⁴² The black woman’s sexuality thus embodied all that was savage and uncivilised about the “dark continent” of Africa. By the eighteenth century it was a common assumption made by travellers to Africa and plantation owners in the West Indies that the black woman represented the ‘...sunkissed embodiment of ardency.’⁴³ An English poem published in 1777, concerning the West Indian Island of Jamaica, included the verse:

Next comes a warmer race, from sable sprung,
To love each thought, to lust each nerve is strung:
The Samboe dark, and the Mullattoe brown,
The Mestize fair, the well-limb’d Quaderoon,
And jetty Afric, from no spurious sire.
Warm as her soil, and as her sun-on fire.
These sooty dames, well vers’d in Venus’ school,
Make love an art, and boast they kiss by rule.⁴⁴

Thus the black woman’s sexuality was defined as simultaneously uncivilised and immoral yet, to European males, desirable and available. Slave-owning men in the American South would subsequently use images of the “black jezebel” in order to justify their sexual abuse and exploitation of the enslaved woman.⁴⁵ Her alleged promiscuity

⁴² John Mandeville, cited in *Ibid.* 170.

⁴³ Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 150.

⁴⁴ ‘Jamaica, a Poem, in Three Parts’ (London, 1777), cited in *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ For a further discussion of the image of the “black jezebel” see Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, (New York, London, W.W. Norton, 1985), Chapter One, “Jezebel and Mammy: The Mythology of Female Slavery”.

and sexual licentiousness were blamed for the seduction of the white man's passions. Moreover the sexual purity of elite white women was preserved and maintained through the sexual exploitation of the enslaved black woman.

As slavery developed on the North American mainland racialised discourses that were imbued with notions about gender and sexual differences circulated to mark off white society from the enslaved black population. As bearers of future generations, white women came to embody all that was pure and pious about the white race. By the early nineteenth century notions of white womanhood served to bolster the system of slavery as white female purity was contrasted to the alleged sexual depravity of the black female slave. Barbara Welter has argued that the 'attributes of true womanhood [were] divided into four cardinal virtues, piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity, put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman.'⁴⁶ The most essential of these ingredients in order to lay claim to "womanhood" was that of purity, 'without it she was in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order.'⁴⁷

It was within this lower order that the white southern elite located the enslaved woman. She was defined as possessing an active and overt sexuality, which was contrasted to that of the supposedly chaste elite white woman. The enslaved woman was cast as the exact opposite of her white mistress in terms of sexual purity and fidelity. This image was given credence through the white man's sexual exploitation of the enslaved woman.⁴⁸ He justified his own actions by shifting the burden of blame to the enslaved woman and her alleged sexual licentiousness. The paradox of the contrasting images of elite white and enslaved black women was that white men used the enslaved woman's sexual identity in order to establish and maintain the purity and honour of elite

⁴⁶ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood", in Martin Gordon, [ed.], *The American Family in Sociohistorical Perspective*, (New York, St Martins Press, 1978), 313.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 315.

⁴⁸ See Jordan, *White Over Black*, Chapter Four, "Fruits of Passion".

white women. The identity of the enslaved woman was inextricably bound to the idealised representations of white womanhood, even though she was defined as the antithesis of these images.

In the narrative of Harriet Jacobs, she described her master's sexual advances upon her at the age of fifteen. 'I now entered on my fifteenth year – a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ears, young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import.'⁴⁹ In comparing the life of the white mistress and that of the slave Harriet Jacobs illustrated how black and white women were defined against each other, one as the idealised image of purity and the other as the embodiment of sin,

The fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman from childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers and overhead by a sunny sky...How had these years dealt with her slave sister...She also, was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink.⁵⁰

The image of the sexualised black jezebel was a recurrent figure in the self-serving justifications of enslavement advocated during the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. Her presence was to be retained and she emerged in subsequent historical accounts of enslavement well into the twentieth century. Frazier, as we have seen, drew on white society's assertions of the "loose sexual mores" that had characterised black Africans even prior to their enslavement on the North American mainland, in order to explain the disintegration of the modern black family. The establishment of relationships and creation of familial units by the enslaved were

⁴⁹ Harriet Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl – Written by Herself", 773.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 776.

characterised in the work of historians such as Frazier as being driven purely by sexual, physical urges rather than as relationships grounded in ideals of mutual consent and deep emotional attachment. As Chapter Four of this thesis illustrates, labour on the plantations in the American South typically blurred the gender divisions between enslaved men and women. Enslaved women were further defined as distinct from white women through the hard physical work they performed in the field and in the plantation household. Moreover several of the WPA respondents referred to the work that the enslaved woman performed as “man’s work”.⁵¹ The work regimes of the enslaved thus served to enhance the definition of the black woman in wholly physical terms. She was evaluated on the basis of her levels of production (in terms of labour output) and reproduction (in terms of childbirth), itself the consequence of her “unbridled” sexuality.

Enslaved women were then defined as the epitome of lewd black sexuality, however enslaved men too faced a catalogue of assertions regarding their sexual nature and gendered identity. Enslavement in the New World presented an affront to the established gender norms of West African society and served to undermine the African man’s sense of masculinity. In West African societies agricultural labour was typically defined as “woman’s work”. Black male identity in West Africa rested on activities such as hunting or the role of the warrior. Consequently, the majority of those enslaved in the West African slave system were women, primarily because in the West African gender order it was women who performed labour intensive and low status tasks such as field work. As Hilary Beckles has argued in the context of West African slavery and society, ‘Importantly, women were expected to perform agricultural labour which was prescribed and understood within the dominant gendered division of labour as “woman work”’.⁵²

⁵¹ This aspect of enslaved life in North Carolina is explored further in Chapter Four.

⁵² Hilary Beckles, “Centreing Woman: The Political Economy of Gender in West African and Caribbean Slavery”, in Christine Barrow, [ed.], *Caribbean Portraits: Essays on Gender Ideologies and Identities*, (Kingston, Jamaica, Ian Randle, 1998), 97.

The labour regimes on the plantations of the West Indies and the North America mainland represented something that was altogether unfamiliar to West African men. White European men did not share a gender ideology that equated agricultural labourer with “women’s work” and West African men were put to work in the fields, performing a variety of labour intensive agricultural tasks. These labour regimes challenged and in many ways undermined the masculine identity of West African men. Beckles claimed that in the context of the early Caribbean slave system West African gender attitudes and identities were exploded and reconfigured by a system that confronted, rejected and restructured such ideals.⁵³ In the context of North America it is also possible to suggest that for enslaved men, who were imported directly from West Africa, the labour demanded of them violated West African understandings of appropriate gendered divisions of labour.⁵⁴

Certainly, by the antebellum period the enslaved seemed to have adopted some of the ideals that governed the gender order of the white southern elite. As Chapter Four illustrates enslaved men gained a monopoly over more prestigious roles in the labour hierarchy such as that of the skilled artisan or the slave driver, and were thus able to reassert a sense of masculine authority within the enslaved community. Moreover, Chapter Four also demonstrates that whilst both enslaved men and women performed field labour they began to understand such activities as “man’s work”. This seemed to reject traditional West African understandings of the sexual division of labour and alternatively embraced the values of the white master and mistress. The white southern elite defined women from their social class in terms of domesticity and frailty and who were ideally not expected to perform the labour intensive tasks such as ploughing and

⁵³ *Ibid.* 95.

⁵⁴ For a further discussion of the ways in which West African gender norms were disrupted by the work regimes imposed on the enslaved in the American South and possible enslaved resistance and reaction to this see Edward A. Pearson, “A Countryside Full of Flames: A Reconsideration of the Stono Rebellion and Slave Rebelliousness in the Early Eighteenth Century South Carolina Lowcountry”, *Slavery and Abolition*, 17 (1996), No 2, 22-50.

digging that were demanded of enslaved women. There had been then, a significant shift in enslaved conceptions of gender roles, relations and identities by the early nineteenth century. Yet, initially the labour regimes that were imposed upon West African men, enslaved on the North American mainland, served to upset their accepted understandings of the gender order and consequently abused their own sense of masculine identity.

In addition to the work regimes that forced enslaved West African men to question their masculinity, the southern slave system served to further undermine the significance of the enslaved man's gendered identity through negating their authority in the context of the family and the household. As this chapter has already noted the child born to an enslaved women inherited its mother's status and thus the role of the father was at once diluted, at least in the eyes of the slave-owner. Furthermore, it was the master and not the enslaved man, as husband or father, who presided over the organisation and social relations of the enslaved family. As Margaret Burnham has pointed out the enslaved child was the equal of their parents at birth, '...the slave mother and father could not shape their child's existence, nor could they exercise control over their child's fate...' ⁵⁵ Whilst the bond between an enslaved mother and child was largely recognised by the slave-owning classes, they declared the role of the enslaved father in the life of his children to be invalid.

Deborah Gray White has argued that the ultimate control of the slave-owner over both the children and spouse of enslaved men was an assault on their sense of manhood. ⁵⁶ Harriet Jacobs related a story in her narrative, which serves to illustrate the profound questions of authority and domination in the lives of enslaved men. She recalled that her brother William had been called at the same time by both his father and his mistress; '...he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the

⁵⁵ Margaret Burnham, "An Impossible Marriage: Slave Law and Family Law", *Law and Inequality*, 5 (1987), 187-227, 205.

⁵⁶ See White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 142-146.

strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress...'⁵⁷ William's father reproved him for his decision and instructed him that '...you are *my* child...and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water...'⁵⁸ Despite the claims of William's father, that William was *his* child, William's behaviour demonstrated that it was not the father who commanded his time and governed the behaviour of the enslaved child, but the demands of the master and mistress.

Similarly, in the context of conjugal relationships, enslaved men were forced to witness the physical and sexual abuse of their wives and girlfriends by slave-owners and overseers. White cited examples such as the enslaved man Louis Hughes, who '...stood stark still, blood boiling as his master choked his wife for talking back to the mistress. His wife was subsequently tied to a joist in a barn and beaten while he stood powerless to do anything for her.'⁵⁹ In a slave-holding society such as the American South, where male authority and power was displayed in the context of the household, masculinity could not be disentangled from the ability to protect one's family. Yet enslaved men such as Louis Hughes, deprived of this power, could only stand by and watch helplessly as the slave-owner physically abused their spouses. To have intervened in the punishment of his wife was to risk retribution himself. Yet, as Chapter Six argues, enslaved men did sometimes risk their lives to protect their loved ones, and in doing so, were able to assert a protective masculinity. However, the very fact that enslaved women were threatened with such punishments suggests that the masculine role of enslaved men as protectors of their family was consistently and constantly abused in the slave-holding South.

⁵⁷ Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl", 755.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

⁵⁹ Cited in White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 146.

The enslaved man's masculine identity was further undermined, or at least questioned through images that characterised him as child-like, dependent and subservient. The white elite used such representations in order to further clarify that the system of slavery could serve to benefit the black man. Writing to his mother in 1859, southerner Henry Burgwyn presented an image of his servant Dempse that embodied the notion of stupidity and brutish behaviour that served to justify the enslavement of the black race, 'You may talk about the trials you have had with "wide mouth" "gaping" Edmund but I am sure if you could at this moment step into my room & see the Ethiopian who is honoured by waiting on me you would acknowledge Edmund to be a perfect Ganemede when compared to this Fhyestian "Dempse"...'⁶⁰ Dempse is further characterised as the comical and docile servant whom Henry Burgwyn takes much delight in mocking. 'His chosen manner of walking is to move with the back bent and with his slim legs curved like a bent bow. When in my presence when he wishes to be particularly graceful & quiet he slides along on tip toe & usually takes steps a yard long. I sometimes see him from my window sailing along as described above at the rate of two forty on the plank.'⁶¹

Henry Burgwyn's images of Dempse and Edmund provides an illustration of the ways in which enslaved men were described as childlike and immature demanding supervision and guidance from their white masters. The *sambo* image offered a specific representation of the enslaved man, which was projected by the white slave-owning classes and later located in the historiography of enslavement.⁶² This was but one white

⁶⁰ 3 April 1859, from Henry K. Burgwyn Jr, Chapel Hill, North Carolina to his mother Anna Burgwyn, Burgwyn Family Papers, 1787-1987, fol. 4, 1858-1859, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*. (emphasis in original).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² For a discussion of the competing images of black masculinity in the American South see Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, Chapter Five, "Plantation Stereotypes and Institutional Roles", Chapter Six, "Plantation Realities" and Chapter Seven, "Slave Personality Types". For a discussion of the sambo image see Stanley Elkins, *Slavery, A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, (Chicago University Press, 1968), 82.

image of black masculinity in the American South and its intention was to neutralise white fears regarding black male sexuality and assured the white man that in no way was his own power and control under threat.

Themes of African inferiority and dependency were therefore used to underpin arguments that justified and rationalised the system of slavery in the American South. In defence of the slave system, statesman and pro-slavery advocate, John Calhoun argued that ‘Never before has the black race of central Africa, from the dawn of history to the present day, attained a condition so civilised and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually. It came among us in a low, degraded and savage condition and in the course of a few generations it has grown up under the fostering care of our institutions.’⁶³ By invoking the notion that the African was morally improved under the conditions of enslavement Calhoun employed those ideas regarding African inferiority, which he used in order to justify the “white civilising mission” based on ideals of white civility and superiority.

The enslaved were defined then not only as brutish and savage but also as infantile and in need of guidance from the white slave-owning classes. The system of slavery was justified on the basis that the enslaved African and subsequent generations born in the Americas were incapable of caring for themselves and surviving without the guiding hand of their white master and mistress. It was explained thus by Francis Cope Yarnell in his “Letters on Slavery” written in 1853; ‘[Slaves] are like children needing constant protection and oversight.’⁶⁴ Nearly eighty years later Frazier would advocate the same argument to suggest that the black population could not adapt to the conditions of emancipation, being naturally disposed to a life of enslavement under the supervision of a master. The enslaved were not defined as having an independent or autonomous self

⁶³ John C. Calhoun, [1782-1850], Speech on the Reception of Abolition Petitions, in Eric L. McKittrick, [ed.], *Slavery Defended: The Views of the Old South*, (New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1963), 13.

⁶⁴ Francis Cope Yarnell, “Letters on Slavery”, (1853), Francis Cope Yarnell Papers, 1853-1861, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

and throughout the centuries of enslavement and the subsequent historiography of the early twentieth century they were located in white discourse as either the antithesis of white civility or as an appendage of their master's plantation.

Whilst enslaved men were forced to re-evaluate their gendered identity in the context of the slave-holding south, they were also simultaneously defined in the popular white imagination as illustrative of an aggressive and dangerous type of masculinity.⁶⁵ It was understood as such in a letter written by Anna Bingham to her daughter, Mary Lynch in 1839. Anna who was inquiring about the welfare of one of the slaves who was pregnant on the family's plantation in Orange County wrote, 'I am very anxious to know how Charlotte is by this time. If she has a child I trust it may not have the same father as Clarissa's. *I know the shocking depravity of London would give you and Mr Lynch many uneasy moments.* I don't know how you can keep them on the same plantation.'⁶⁶ The sexuality of enslaved black men was then defined as rampant and dangerous, especially to the elite white woman of the American South, who was represented as the particular object of the black man's sexual urges.⁶⁷ The enslaved man was defined as uncivilised

⁶⁵ See Jordan, *White Over Black*, 151-164.

⁶⁶ 8 February 1839, from Anna Bingham, Paris, Tennessee to Mary (Bingham) Lynch, Hillsborough, Orange County, Thomas and Mary Bingham Lynch Papers, 1794-1895, box 1, fol.3, correspondence 1838-43, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*. (emphasis added).

⁶⁷ Several historians have questioned whether the enslaved black man was characterised as particularly "sexually threatening" in the context of the slave South. Martha Hodes has argued that the image of the sexually menacing black man did not become a prominent issue in the southern white mind until after emancipation when the black man was no longer subject to the controls of slavery that had maintained his powerless position. Ideas concerning enslaved men as sexually aggressive are, Hodes suggested, historically inaccurate and represent a projection backwards from post-emancipation concerns. See Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South*, (Yale University Press, 1997). Diane Sommerville has also questioned whether southern society was obsessed with the sexual dangers posed by black men. Sommerville used rape cases, involving free and enslaved black men, from antebellum Virginia to illustrate the fact that in nearly half of these cases, the accused escaped execution, even after conviction. Sommerville argued that the sexual and racial angst that stimulated the lynch mobs after the Civil War failed to appear before emancipation. The perpetuation of the "rape myth" in the Old South was an example of postbellum white angst read backwards into the antebellum period. See Diane Miller Sommerville, "The Rape Myth in the Old South Reconsidered", *Journal of Southern History*, LXI (August 1995), No 3, 481-518. Such critiques provide new insight into the complex and contradictory images presented of the black man in the antebellum South, most especially in relation to his sexual identity. I would argue that the image of the sexually menacing enslaved man was a prevalent concern of the white antebellum mind

and savage. He was represented as being in need of a system that would improve his sense of morality and which would exert a restraining and civilising influence over his character. The black man's sexuality was cast as a wild animal that needed the moral direction of white society in order to tame it.

The enslaved black man occupied a contradictory position then. Whilst his masculinity was undermined and he was made subject to the authority and control of white men, he was also seen to embody an aggressive and threatening sexual nature, which emphasised his masculine identity. Proponents of the slave system could not dispose of a discourse that represented the black man as being controlled by physical urges rather than emotional and rational feeling, for this was a fundamental justification for their enslavement that sought to morally improve the black race as a whole. Yet by advocating the notion of an aggressive black male sexuality the white slave-owner acknowledged that he was not in all ways masterful.

Whilst representations of the enslaved as childlike seemed to compete with images that accentuated the sexuality of the enslaved man and woman there was a point of commonality in all these stereotypes. Whether they were cast as being governed wholly by their sexual desires or as childish and immature, the enslaved were classed as being incapable of experiencing and expressing emotions such as love. The black race as a whole were seen to be governed by physical urges alone and were deemed as incapable of experiencing the finer emotions of falling in love or establishing emotional bonds.

and that this concern was carried forward into the postbellum period. The very fact that in Virginia from 1800-1865, over 150 black men were condemned to die for sexually assaulting white women and children, (Sommerville, 485), indicates that the sexuality of the black man was an overriding concern in antebellum white society. What differed however between the antebellum and postbellum period were the ways in which this perceived threat was managed. In the antebellum period, over half of those men condemned to die for the crime of rape in Virginia, escaped execution, yet it's possible that if they were enslaved they received alternative punishments, such as being sold out of Virginia. The sale of an enslaved man ensured that the slave-owner was financially compensated for the loss of his labourer, whilst the state was not required to provide this economic remuneration. Thus it was not that the black man was not deemed as sexually dangerous during the antebellum period, but that the slave system shaped and limited the nature of punishment and control. During the postbellum period, white southerners could no longer rely on such mechanisms and thus they resorted to brutal violence in order to control the perceived threat of the black man and his alleged unbridled and dangerous sexuality.

Thomas Jefferson, for example, argued that the black man was ‘far more ardent after their female’ than the white man. However, Jefferson continued, the black man did not and could not understand the intense emotional experiences that accompanied the white man as he sought a loving companion for life. Jefferson wrote that concerning the black man ‘Love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation.’⁶⁸ To recognise and acknowledge that the enslaved were capable of such feelings would have undermined the justifications for enslavement employed by men such as Calhoun, concerning the moral improvement of the black race, and hence have rendered them meaningless. In denying the emotive capacity of the black man and woman proponents of the slave system were provided with further justification for their cause.

Such an evaluation of the emotional depths of the enslaved was not restricted to the North American mainland. Indeed, neither was it limited to wealthy slave-owners such as Jefferson. For example, the Brazilian abolitionist Joaquim Nabuco characterised the family life of the enslaved as devoid of any emotional attachments. Writing about the sexual unions of the enslaved he argued that ‘There is no fidelity in this nameless promiscuity because there is no love...There is no future, no affections, no notions of honour or duty, they must live for the present, nothing more...’⁶⁹ Writing in a similar vein to Daniel Moynihan in the 1960s, Nabuco critiqued the institution of slavery as completely destructive of the individual’s ability to establish and maintain close and committed relationships. Whilst he was not suggesting, as was Jefferson, that the “flaw” was inherent in the black race themselves, the effect of Nabuco’s comments amounted to the same thing. Both men defined the black race as being incapable of feeling the emotion of love. Contemporary analyses of the “dysfunctional” black family, such as

⁶⁸ Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia”, (1787), in Emanuel, C, Eze, [ed.], *Race and the Enlightenment*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 1997), 98.

⁶⁹ Joaquim Nabuco, cited in Robert Levine and John Crocitti, [eds.], *The Brazil Reader*, (London, published by the Latin American Bureau, 1999), 144.

Frazier's, left unquestioned this basic tenet of the slave system. Rather, the scholarship of Frazier, and later, Moynihan, employed these racialising discourses to support their contentions regarding the nature of the post-emancipation black family. It was a short but simple step to link the crude assessment of black sexuality in the slave-holding south to the perceived disintegration and deviance of the black family in contemporary America.

2.4: Romanticism and Realism: The Emotional Dynamics of Enslaved Life

Gutman's analysis began to deconstruct the myths regarding black sexuality and the place of emotions in the lives of black men and women. However, this emphasis on the positive aspects of enslaved experience led many to question whether his analysis had romanticised enslaved life. Deborah Gray White argued that Gutman's use of marriage registers to illustrate the length of enslaved unions could not necessarily reveal whether that relationship was grounded in voluntary circumstances or if it had been the product of plantation rules, which had led to enforced unions between unwilling partners. White pointed out that 'By itself the length of slave marriages also provides no indication that they were founded on romance. Slave romances existed and courtship was one of the rites slave masters could not eliminate...[but] for every marriage anchored in romantic love there was probably one that grew out of pragmatic considerations.'⁷⁰ She considered relationships such as those of the enslaved woman, Molly, whose husband was sold away from her as punishment for repeatedly trying to run away. Molly was given a new husband named Tony. Even though Molly was married to Tony for nine years, she never considered him her real husband. According to Molly, '...her real husband was the man sold away by their master eleven pregnancies ago.'⁷¹ The complexities of enslaved life cannot be revealed solely through an

⁷⁰ White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 150.

⁷¹ Fanny Kemble, "Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation", cited in *Ibid.* 149.

assessment of quantitative material such as marriage registers and thus White critiqued Gutman for his uncritical use of such source materials to evaluate the emotional dynamics of enslaved life.

In his research on enslaved family life in antebellum South Carolina, Larry Hudson argued that when the enslaved established family units, romantic considerations were secondary to their own personal economic motivations. Hudson suggested that a more satisfactory way of examining the enslaved family was needed in order for the historian to look beyond the “African retentions” argument. ‘To demonstrate that the slaves had or did not have strong, stable families, then, is only part of the exercise. More relevant is an appreciation of what the family meant to the slaves, the numerous benefits it provided, and the disadvantages for those who, for whatever reason, found themselves without a supportive family group.’⁷²

For Hudson, the work and garden system undertaken on many South Carolinian plantations facilitated the development of an internal economy in the quarters of the enslaved that in turn allowed for the creation of economic and social space between the enslaved and their master. This allowed the enslaved some control over family life and meant that they could retain a degree of economic and cultural autonomy. However, Hudson argued that the enslaved could accumulate prestige and power only through the assistance and support of a family unit: ‘...[the] only way for [the] vast majority of slaves to balance [the] power of master was to organise themselves into economically productive units.’⁷³ Hudson claimed that this was the primary rationale for the enslaved to establish stable family units, and whilst he did not discount the importance of love in the lives of the enslaved, he suggested that such emotions were governed by wider economic considerations. The choices that the enslaved had available to them in terms of selecting and obtaining a partner were, according to Hudson, linked to economic power,

⁷² Hudson, *To Have and To Hold*, xxi.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 31.

for the more prestige and prosperity the enslaved possessed, the more options were available to them, ‘Of course, romantic love and the intrinsic worth of a person had a part to play but it may not have been the main part. The trick was to be selective and then fall in love.’⁷⁴

Hudson’s work presented a much more complex assessment of enslaved familial experiences than Gutman’s research had suggested. Whilst retaining the idea of cultural autonomy and social space, Hudson considered the practicalities and pragmatic realities of enslaved life, locating the family as the cornerstone of survival for the enslaved. In moving towards a rationalist explanation in a consideration of affectionate relationships and the establishment of familial units amongst the enslaved, Hudson had not lost sight of the emotional dimensions of the experiences of enslavement. He incorporated into his analysis much of what Charles Joyner had termed “the emotional texture of slave life”⁷⁵ and therefore considered the human values, the anxieties and worries, dreams and desires of the enslaved in the course of his research. Yet, according to Hudson, the actions of the enslaved were ultimately governed by economic incentives and considerations. This emphasis served to locate the enslaved family as an economic unit of production, rather than as a nexus of competing and conflicting relations based not only on structural considerations but also emotional needs and desires. Hudson’s work provides an example of the ways in which historians have begun to consider the role of love and romance in the lives of the enslaved, but yet only so as to dismiss or limit its importance.

The growing historiography concerning the enslaved family has made possible further research and interest in the emotional dynamics of slave life. Recent work such as that of Emily West has considered the impact of cross-plantation unions on enslaved life in antebellum South Carolina. West argued that cross-plantation unions were vital in

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 158.

⁷⁵ Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*. (Urbana, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1984), xvii.

enabling enslaved families to cope with separations that were local in nature. Developing Gutman's argument that these "broad marriages" had served to expand kin networks and thus made the enslaved less dependent upon ties to their owner, West demonstrated that cross-plantation unions allowed the enslaved to maintain their relationships across distances and thus retain a sense of cultural autonomy from the effects of the slave system.⁷⁶

West also pointed to the ways in which cross-plantation marriages between the enslaved conformed to dominant gender ideologies of white southern society. Gutman's analysis had previously failed to consider the gendered relations that structured the familial units of the enslaved. West argued in her work that cross-plantation unions were suggestive of the gender patterns that developed in the culture of the enslaved, 'The fact that male slaves frequently risked the wrath of their owners and the patrollers in visiting their wives and girlfriends is illustrative not only of the extent of male-female bonding but also of notions of the role of the male.'⁷⁷ This thesis will consider the work of West in terms of this reanalysis of gendered relations within the enslaved community. Chapters Five and Six consider how enslaved men and women courted when they lived on different plantations. Definite gendered ideals operated in enslaved courtship and this was particularly so when a relationship was managed across plantations.

Previous work by feminist historians has emphasised the negative effects of cross-plantation unions and familial life for enslaved women. Deborah Gray White for example has argued that because of the gender roles that operated amongst the enslaved it was nearly always enslaved men who visited their wife in circumstances of cross-plantation unions. Enslaved women were tied to the plantation because of familial responsibility and consequently their mobility was limited, and it was more difficult for

⁷⁶ See West, *Love and Affection, Exploitation and Resistance*; West, "Surviving Separation: Cross Plantation Marriages and the Slave Trade in Antebellum South Carolina"; West, "The Debate on the Strength of Slave Families"; West, "Masters and Marriages".

⁷⁷ West, "Surviving Separation", 223.

them to run away or leave the plantation.⁷⁸ bell hooks further claimed that the gendered relations of enslaved couples were dominated by black male misogyny that was illustrated through the abuse and mistreatment of their wives and lovers.⁷⁹ Both accounts neglected the lengths to which some enslaved men went in order to pursue a relationship or maintain their family unit. West's research sought to reposition the enslaved family as an arena in which enslaved men and women could reclaim a positive sense of gendered identity. This thesis will strengthen West's contention regarding the nature of gendered relationships between enslaved couples through an examination of the courting relationship and the distinctive gendered roles occupied by enslaved men and women within this distinct social arena.

Scholarship such as that of Emily West's has emphasised the resilience and autonomy of enslaved life. Whilst Gutman was accused of overstating the evidence and consequently romanticising enslaved experiences, West suggested that it was the *desire* for social space that was of crucial significance in an analysis of relationships of the enslaved.⁸⁰ By setting the enslaved family in context, West reflected on the dynamics of negotiation and resistance that structured the nature of enslaved relationships whilst maintaining the sense of importance and value that the enslaved attached to the establishment of affectionate unions. This research thus develops West's work by moving away from a consideration of the meaning of the family amongst the enslaved towards a more in-depth examination of courtship between enslaved men and women as a significant social relationship. Building upon West's idea that the strength and endurance of their familial relationships illustrates an example of enslaved resistance, courtship is understood in the course of this thesis as a terrain upon which the enslaved

⁷⁸ White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?* 76.

⁷⁹ bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, (London, Pluto Press, 1982), 35.

⁸⁰ West, *Love and Affection, Exploitation and Resistance*, 46.

challenged and contested the slave-owner's assumed rights over their emotional lives and physical bodies.

Stephanie Camp has offered a sophisticated revision of the ways in which resistance should be understood in the intimate and personal lives of the enslaved. Camp has explored the personal and political meanings of bodily pleasure made and experienced by the enslaved at clandestine and secret social gatherings at which they danced, performed music, and courted.⁸¹ This element of enslaved life and Camp's analysis will be discussed further in Chapter Five. Camp's work represents one of the first attempts by historians to really understand the nature of the courting experience for the enslaved. Furthermore, Camp's argument linked the context and practices of courtship amongst the enslaved to a wider discourse of resistance. This resistance competed with and challenged the slave-owner's endeavours to control and regulate the mobility and behaviour of their enslaved labour force. Camp's analysis has then created a framework within which further research can occur. By locating the social practices of courtship as part of a larger narrative of resistance for the enslaved, Camp's work is suggestive of the broader possibilities to be gained from focussing on such aspects of enslaved life.

Thus far, the historiography of enslaved life has only just begun to offer an analysis of the practices and meanings of courtship. Whilst much has been written regarding the enslaved family there has been limited consideration of the ways in which the courting relationships of the enslaved were established or the significance derived from these practices. At best, a discussion of courtship rules precedes a more nuanced and detailed consideration of aspects of enslaved familial life such as in West's work. Rarely, and only more recently, have the practicalities of courtship and the emotional rules governing the establishment of relationships been considered as worthy of merit on

⁸¹ Stephanie Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861", *Journal of Southern History*, LXVIII (August 2002), No 3, 533-572.

their own terms. This may be due to the relative lack of source material regarding the courtship experiences of the enslaved compared to the wealth of accessible information available concerning other aspects of enslaved life. However, as an increasing number of historians make cautious use of the WPA narratives alongside variable sources derived from the white planter classes and wider society, understanding the emotional world of the enslaved, including courtship practices and the pursuit of romance, should prove to be much more rewarding.

The current literature on the enslaved family largely fails to provide a model on which to base an historical consideration of the emotional contours of enslaved life. However, as the next chapter will illustrate, there is a wealth of illuminating material documenting the development of romantic love amongst the white southern elite. This alternative historiography can provide a basis from which to begin to incorporate the emotional dynamics of enslaved life into our understandings of slavery in the antebellum South. Did the black man experience love as eager desire rather than as sentiment and sensation, as Jefferson asserted? Did the complexities of the slave system drive enslaved men and women to prioritise economics over emotion when establishing a family unit, as Hudson suggests? The literature on elite white courtship in the South provides a useful tool to consider where, if anywhere, the enslaved can be incorporated into the historiography of love and courtship.

Chapter Three

The Historiography of Love and Courtship

As the previous chapter has illustrated, the current historiography regarding enslaved life has failed to prioritise courtship and love as an important element in the relationships of the enslaved. Yet, much has been written regarding the romantic relationships of the white elite in both England and North America. Whilst a comparative historiography concerning the intimate relationships of the enslaved and free blacks in the slave-holding south has yet to be completed, poor whites of the colonial and antebellum American South have begun to move into the centre of historical research and recent work has begun to understand the personal relationships that structured the life experiences of these previously neglected individuals.¹ This chapter provides an overview of the current historiography concerning romantic love both in England and on the North American mainland. It then shifts to a discussion of how this historiography might be useful when considering the emotional world of the enslaved.

The historiography concerning the romantic lives of the white elite contains a wealth of material and sources that illuminate our understanding of how specific couples established a courting relationship, their individual demands and expectations of each other, as well as broader societal evaluations of the meaning and the importance of romantic love. The marginalisation of the enslaved in this historiography is primarily due to the difficulty of gaining access to their personal worlds. Both the social elite of England and the white planter class in the American South have left the historian an abundance of personal letters, diaries and other such written sources. Their personal and intimate worlds are much more open to historical investigation than those who left little explicit documentation concerning their inner emotional lives.

¹ For further reading see Bynum, *Unruly Women*; Lockley, "Crossing the Racial Divide"; Lockley, *Lines in the Sand*; Fischer, *Suspect Relations*; Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, (Baltimore, London, John Hopkins University Press, 2002), especially Chapter Four, "Living in a State of Nature: Sex, Marriage and Southern Degenerates."

However, the themes and techniques that have emerged out of the historical analysis of the elite can serve as a basis for further consideration of the inner emotional experiences of marginalized sectors of a particular society. Despite its focus on the white elite, the historiography of romantic love has established significant questions and considerations concerning the historical examination of the personal and intimate. The existing historiography of white elite courtship therefore can provide a model on which to write a history of romantic love and courtship between enslaved men and women in the antebellum South.

One of the central themes of this historiography has been the debate concerning the concept of romantic love. There has been considerable interest in the historical emergence of the term and much of the discussion has focussed upon the question of the historical moment that romantic love became the governing factor in marital relationships. In terms of North America, the principal consideration governing the historiography is that of the divide between the north and the south. Essentially the question has pivoted on whether the system of slavery in the American South prevented the emergence of courtship and marriage practices based on ideals of romantic love among the white community. These aspects of the historiography will be discussed at greater length in the course of this chapter.

Such considerations are important for the purpose of this thesis in considering the degree of cultural interaction between the enslaved and the slave-holding elite in the arena of courtship. This research does not explicitly address where enslaved ideals concerning romantic love derived from, i.e. whether they were West African in form or the product of assimilation to the values of elite white southern society. Nevertheless, as Chapter Five highlights, certain aspects of the enslaved courtship experience did resonate with that of the white southern elite, in particular the marriage ceremony. Moreover, as Chapter Six argues, the slave-owning elite exerted a significant influence over the courting relationships and the emotional lives of the enslaved. Consequently, it is important to consider the particular attitudes that the slave-owner possessed regarding

love and courtship in order to explore how this may have impacted on the ability of the enslaved to manage and shape the nature of their own courting relationships.

Existing historical research has also considered the practical aspects of courtship. For example, while the white southern elite met and socialised in numerous settings, the ball has emerged as one of the most significant arenas in terms of establishing a courtship. Subsequently, it would be interesting to consider the social spaces in which the enslaved were able to establish courting relationships. For instance, which specific social settings emerged as significant in the courtships of the enslaved? The historiography of white romantic love has also established the importance of letter writing for the romantically attached amongst the southern slave owning classes. Yet, the enslaved, whose culture was essentially non-literate, were required to employ other ways in which to communicate these aspects of their lives. This might lead us to consider the channels through which the enslaved were able to explore and express their desires, hopes and aspirations in the realm of love and courtship.

3.1: ‘People would never fall in love if they had not heard of love [and] talked about it’²: The Origins of Romantic Love – An Historical Debate

The central question in the historiography of love and courtship has focussed upon the historical construction of romantic love. Certain historians have located the late eighteenth century as the period in which ideals regarding romantic love were developed as a significant and important aspect of the marital relationship. Lawrence Stone’s seminal text, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, argued that the ideal of romantic love became much more important in England for the middle classes, in the period between 1500 and 1800. He pointed to wider social and political changes that occurred during this time as the primary catalyst for increased emotional investment in personal relationships.

² Duc de la Rochefoucauld, cited in Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, 191.

Stone's account has been severely critiqued by fellow historians primarily for his failure to consider romantic love as a distinguishing feature of English marriage from a much earlier period, and also for claiming that romantic love was an eighteenth century invention.³ Alan McFarlane has argued that '...The basis of modern romantic love [was] established in canon law by at least the twelfth century.'⁴ McFarlane also pointed to wider popular writings such as plays, prose and poems to support his argument that love was a dominant theme in the public imagination as early as the fifteenth century.⁵

In Stone's defence, he did acknowledge that expectations of emotional satisfaction, romantic love and matrimonial happiness, which were celebrated and popularised in the eighteenth century, were nothing new. However, he argued that it was the attitudes towards these feelings that had changed in society as a whole. Romantic love, for Stone was a product of learned cultural expectations, which had developed from the early modern period in England, resulting in the eighteenth century ideal of a marriage based upon mutual consent, attraction, intimacy and affection. The proliferation of rhetoric concerning romantic love during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Stone suggested, made the concept somewhat more "real". Couples may well have married for love before this period, but Stone argued that it was not until the eighteenth century that romantic love was celebrated as the legitimate basis for marriage. Stone therefore advanced the claim that ideas about love are historically contingent and are consequently shaped by transformations and changes within the infrastructure and social relations of a given society.

Stone concentrated his analysis on the propertied classes and argued that the elite family of the late middle ages was devoid of emotion, being formed not on the basis

³ For a sustained critique of Stone's work see Alan McFarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840*, (Oxford, New York, Basil Blackwell, 1986).

⁴ *Ibid.* 126.

⁵ *Ibid.* 180.

of emotional attachment or romantic love but upon mutually beneficial interests, such as the alliance of two wealthy or politically powerful families. Stone argued that ‘Marriage among the property owning classes in sixteenth century England was a collective decision of family and kin not an individual one...held together not by affective bonds but by mutual economic interests.’⁶ In comparison, Stone argued that for the poor, who lacked the economic and political incentives to engage with a particular individual, marital choice was a far more personal affair. Stone assumed that the poor had little vested interest in their children’s choice of marriage partner. Many daughters from poor families had entered into service in the developing towns of this early period and thus had left the family home, loosening the bonds of control that a father might have exercised over his daughter’s choice of marital partner. Sons too often entered into apprenticeships and were removed from the physical boundaries of the home. Under these conditions of labour, Stone assumed that sons and daughters from the poorer classes were free to form new social relations without being subject to the same economic and parental controls to which men and women of the propertied classes were exposed.

Stone however failed to account for the more complex set of power relations that structured the lives of the indentured servant and apprentice in early modern England. We cannot assume that parental authority over an apprenticed son or daughter was not replaced by the control of the master and mistress, who may well have sought legal imperatives to prevent their servants from engaging in fornication or “illicit” sexual activity. In fact in the early English colonies in North America, servitude took place in a context in which servants were generally understood to be unmarried labourers and celibacy and a single marital status were prerequisites for the job. This was to ensure that a servant husband’s authority did not undermine that of the master and mistress, while also protecting the purse strings of early colonial governments, who

⁶ Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, 70, 88.

were reluctant to support the illegitimate children of young, unmarried women.⁷ Similarly, and as Chapter Six of this thesis explores, in the lives of the enslaved in the antebellum South, masters and mistresses often attempted to mould and shape their emotional relationships whilst seeking to regulate and control their sexual activities.

If the propertied family of the early modern period in England was cold, disassociated and devoid of love, as Stone suggested, by the seventeenth century the family had begun to nurture warmth, affection and love, and by the late eighteenth century romantic love had become one of the primary motivations for marriage. Stone argued that, 'After 1780...for the first time in history romantic love became a respectable motive for marriage among the propertied classes.'⁸ Stone accounted for this transition in the wider context of movements from the sixteenth century onwards for religious reform and the impact of the English civil war in the 1640s, tumultuous events that both effected change throughout the social structures of English society and the values and ideals of individuals at a personal level. Stone argued that changes in the wider cultural system led to a major reorientation of meaning within the intimate world of the propertied classes. A new interest in the "self" developed as individuals began to pursue individualistic aims and to harbour ideals of privacy, free will, self expression and personal autonomy. Alongside this was the development of new attitudes towards personal relationships, which fostered the growth of affection within a close knit family unit. By the late eighteenth century then, Stone claimed that *affective individualism* had become the core ideal shaping and governing the formation of intimate relationships within the propertied classes.

Stone's research suggests that the historian can learn something about how people felt about love by an examination of their daily lives. For example, he considered

⁷ For a further discussion see Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs*, Chapter Six, "Foul Crimes and Spurious Issues"; Fischer, *Suspect Relations*, Chapter Three, "The Sexual Regulation of Servant Women and Subcultures of Resistance".

⁸ Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, 190.

the increased stress on notions of privacy and separation from the public world within the family by examining the changing physical structure of the family home. Stone argued that ‘In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century...house plans allocated space to corridors, which now allowed access without intruding upon privacy...bedrooms were transferred upstairs.’⁹ For Stone the corridor was representative of the profound psychological shifts occurring in the attitudes and ideals of the propertied classes of England during this period as personal relationships took on new meaning as couples began to conduct their private affairs behind closed doors. This spatial analysis of courtship and the marital relationship represents an alternative way of understanding the nature and meaning of such experiences. These considerations have been employed in Chapter Five of this thesis, which examines the geography of enslaved courtship and explores the social spaces within which courting relationships could be established by the enslaved.

Stone’s model has served as the basis from which many other historians began to investigate the development of romantic love and marriage within the British colonies of North America. Jan Lewis, for example, charted the development of the family and affective ties in colonial and antebellum Virginia. She argued that in the early colonial period the family was not understood as central to an individual’s happiness or worldview. However, by the end of the eighteenth century Virginians had begun to evaluate their lives in new ways and the family took the place of religion, property and public affairs at the forefront of their way of life. Thus Lewis argued that by the late eighteenth century ‘...Both men and women believed that marriage should be based upon affection.’¹⁰

Lewis suggested that the strands of evangelical religion, republican belief, and domestic thought combined in the period after the American Revolution to produce

⁹ *Ibid.* 169.

¹⁰ Jan Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson’s Virginia*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), 188.

these changes in the value accorded to the family and the heightened significance of love as a basis for marriage. Hence, Lewis traced a process of linear changes and transformations that ultimately reshaped the mental universe of post-Revolution Virginians. Thus in Lewis's work we see a model based on that of Stone's analysis, yet with a shift of focus from England to the North American mainland.¹¹

3.2: The Northern Romantic and the Southern Patriarch

The historiography concerning the development of romantic love on the North American mainland has largely excluded the enslaved from its analysis. However, it does establish some useful questions that might be applied in a consideration of the courting experiences of the enslaved. Furthermore, and as I have already noted in this Chapter, the slave-owner in North Carolina emerges as one of the central figures shaping the courting experiences of the enslaved. Thus it is important to establish white southern elite understandings concerning courtship and love so that we might evaluate and comprehend their role in the courtships of enslaved men and women.

Certain historians have suggested that following Independence and in the years before the Civil War there emerged two comparable yet contradictory societies on the North American mainland. The northern states embraced free market values, individualism and egalitarianism. Family relations were seen to move towards a contractual ideal that challenged the traditional concept of a patriarchal family, and instead personal relationships increasingly came to be based on the ideals of romantic

¹¹ For other historical accounts concerning North America based on Stone's model see Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America From the Revolution to the Present*, (New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980); Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800*, (Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne, Sydney, Cambridge University Press, 1982); Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life*, (London, New York, Free Press, Collier Macmillan, 1988).

love and mutual attraction.¹² In contrast, southerners have been seen to hold a rather different view of family and relationships.

‘Although the North and South shared a common core of values, before the civil war the two regions diverged significantly in their understanding of the household order.’¹³ The fundamental difference between the two regions was the issue of slavery. Many historians interested in the domestic relationships of the southern world have cast the institution of slavery as the defining feature of southern life. The social relations of slavery were seen as strengthening the patriarchal family, as white men’s personal power over their dependents was legitimated through the legal, political and social structures of southern society. This reinforcement and protection of southern patriarchal power was required to buttress the system of slavery, which was increasingly reliant upon the ultimate and assured authority of the white slave-owning male. Consequently it has been argued that southerners were unable to move towards a contractual or egalitarian view of familial relationships. This argument inevitably pointed to a southern family that was organised around concepts of coercion and subjection rather than free choice, affection and love. It was assumed that while the northern states were industrialising and embraced capitalist ideals, southerners fiercely protected their social practices and institutions. The hierarchical order within the household was maintained with white men as masters of white women, children and black slaves.

The antebellum southern states retained a commitment to notions of patriarchy and hierarchy that governed the shape of the personal and intimate relationships established by the white slave-owning classes. This diverged significantly from the developing ideals of the northern states, which were moving towards relationships founded on a more egalitarian basis. In 1855, the nature of the southern family was

¹² For a further discussion of the relationships amongst the white middle classes in the antebellum northern states see Ellen Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America*, (New York, Basic Books Inc, 1984); Rothman, “Sex and Self Control”.

¹³ Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household*, xii.

described as ‘...hierarchical [in] character...the relations of the parent and child, of husband and wife, of master and slave, the right to property...all go to make the great corner stone of the social edifice – the family.’¹⁴ For the white elite in the slaveholding states, domestic relations, including those of owners to slaves, were deemed as organic in nature, relying on a *natural* order that sanctioned white male authority and the subjugation and submission of white women, children and slaves.

The focus of debate for historians of the southern white family was whether this hierarchical structure prevented romantic love or affection from becoming the major determinants in southern emotional experiences. Some historians have diluted the image of a “ruling patriarch”, using instead the idea of paternalism, to define the character of relationships within the southern household.¹⁵ The term shifted understandings of southern familial relationships, away from the idea that the male head of the household subjected dependents to his ultimate authority, towards a vision of the southern family that positioned the male head of the household as bound by concepts of duty and obligation to his dependents, black and white, male and female, slave and free. Others have argued that the southern planter family diverged little from that of its northern counterparts. Love and affection were cast as the ideal, if not the only, legitimate basis for marriage or establishing a relationship.¹⁶ A separate and distinct line of historical enquiry has concentrated upon the white planter class within their distinct social world rather than attempting to position them within an analysis of wider North American society.¹⁷ The white southern elite may have shared the values current in the northern

¹⁴ 19 July 1855, “The South and the Union”, *De Bows Review*, cited in *Ibid* .118.

¹⁵ For an example of this see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, (Chapel Hill, London, University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Eugene Genovese, “Our Family, White and Black: Family and Household in the Southern Slaveholder’s View”, in Carol Bleser, [ed.], *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family and Marriage in the Victorian South*, (Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁶ For examples of this see Turner-Censer, *North Carolina Planters*; Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness*.

¹⁷ For an example of this see Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*.

states during the first half of the nineteenth century such as the increasing importance of the family and the ideal of the companionate marriage, yet these values were differently shaped and understood in the South, because of the system of slavery which necessitated the expression of power and authority in every action, word and thought.

The earlier historiography of the southern planter family tended to place domestic relations as integral to and inextricable from the institution of slavery and the dominating patriarchal influence of the master.¹⁸ The central tenets of this argument suggest that although the plantation mistress was aligned to the white, ruling class, by virtue of her gender she occupied a subordinate position similar to that of the black slave – both subject to white male authority under the rubric of patriarchy. For historians such as Catherine Clinton, plantation slavery was not solely a system of economic production, but was also a system of social and sexual control.¹⁹

In a refinement of this argument of an all-embracing southern patriarchy, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1988) offered an alternative explanation for the structure of relationships in the southern planter's world. Fox-Genovese argued that paternalism rather than patriarchy was the main ideal governing relationships in the South. She further claimed that the values of individualism and equality, prominent values in the northern states in the early nineteenth century, failed to gain the same prestige in the South. She argued that '...as a plantation based slave society, it sought to protect the rights and power of the individual male head of household from undue influence by the state.'²⁰ Fox-Genovese cast southern women of the planter class as "deputies" of their male relations who were subject to white male authority. White male power was bolstered in the southern states by a strong commitment to male honour and domination,

¹⁸ For examples of this see Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady, From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*, (Chicago, London, University of Chicago Press, 1970); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress, Woman's World in the Old South*, (New York, Pantheon Books, 1982).

¹⁹ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 6.

²⁰ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 63.

which assured sexual and social control of all white women and the entire black community. Yet, she argued, this cannot be defined as patriarchy: ‘...In ancient Roman society the male head of the household could, at his discretion, kill his wife and children, not to mention his slaves. That was a patriarchy. But the South was not ancient Rome.’²¹

Fox-Genovese’s usage of the term patriarchy implied that the concept was static and unchanging over time. In fact, patriarchy appears in different forms across space and time, shaped by the social, economic and political forces that govern a particular society. Certainly a form of patriarchy structured the slave-holding south, however, the concept of paternalism may provide a clearer understanding of southern familial and social relationships. Fox-Genovese placed the white southern elite in the wider developing bourgeois culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Accordingly, she argued that southern domestic relations were caught up in the multiple and entangled discourses of domesticity, companionate marriage, the idealisation of motherhood and the sentimentalisation of childhood. However, elite white southerners were also attached to ideals of inequality and notions of hierarchy that served to justify the system of enslavement and white female subordination in the South. Fox-Genovese thus argued that in the world of the southern elite, ‘...Their peculiar combination of hierarchically sanctioned male dominance in the household and bourgeois egalitarianism among men in the public sphere can best be read as paternalism. For paternalism invokes a specific metaphor of legitimate domination: the protective domination of the father over his family.’²²

If we consider paternalism as the governing factor of relationships in the American South we can begin to more clearly understand how the enslaved negotiated the restrictions and regulations of the slave system to their own advantage. For example, as discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis, marriage between the enslaved was outlawed

²¹ *Ibid.* 63

²² *Ibid.* 64.

in the American South. Yet, as shown in Chapters Five and Six, masters and mistresses very often consented to their slaves' courting relationships and allowed them to participate in a marriage ceremony if they so wished. Occasionally, the master and mistress would even organise this and the attendant celebrations. The image cultivated by many slave-owners was that the enslaved were part of the plantation family, and the slave owner had a moral and social duty to care and provide for their physical and emotional needs. Yet there were obvious and glaring contradictions to this ideal. For example, the sale and separation of enslaved couples and families illustrated the limits of paternalism. Furthermore it is necessary to question why masters and mistresses went along with, and sometimes even encouraged, enslaved men and women to marry when it held no legal meaning. Perhaps by projecting an image of the paternalistic father figure, the white slave-owning classes could assure themselves that they were decent and respectable people fulfilling their Christian and moral duties. However, in turn, the enslaved could try to manipulate the paternalistic ideal in order to negotiate their own social space away from the world of the master and mistress.²³

3.3: 'My happiness through life depends upon the possession of your heart'²⁴:

Love and Intimacy in the World of Southern Slave-Owners

The characterisation of the southern family in terms of paternalism was suggestive of intimate relationships that were governed by concepts of duty and control rather than mutual attachment or intimacy. However, Jane Turner-Censer argued that planter relations in the slaveholding state of North Carolina were structured through and by discourses of sentimentalisation, affection and free choice rather than paternalistic

²³ This aspect of enslaved life is discussed at much greater length in Chapters Five and Six of this thesis.

²⁴ 27 October 1846, from James W. Bain to Martha Jackson, Orange County, North Carolina, Walker-Miller Family Papers 1824-1978, fol. 2, 1838-1819, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

authority and control.²⁵ She further argued that ‘North Carolina planters were strongly influenced by the sentimentalisation of family life and children that swept like a tidal wave over the wealthy - and perhaps others - in Western Europe and American societies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.’²⁶ Turner-Censer claimed that wealthy Carolinians similarly possessed a tendency towards sentimentality and emotive expression. In this sense, Turner-Censer argued that the ‘...planter family practices closely resembled those of genteel urban northerners.’²⁷

Whilst Turner-Censer’s analysis offered an insight into the intimate and personal worlds of the planter classes of a particular southern state she was critiqued for failing to locate these private emotions within their significance to the wider context of southern society. Steven Stowe argued that ‘...To characterise planter class marriages as affectionate is only partly true...all sorts of affect (and its absence) were invested with great significance in the antebellum years. Marriage was not simply more loving in some absolute way than a century earlier.’²⁸ In her analysis, Turner-Censer failed to fully explain the significance and the meaning of courtship or romance within the context of southern society. She had not elaborated on the discourses, rhetoric and rituals that structured those social practices adopted in the South and the specific southern ideals that shaped such behaviour. A focus on the rituals and rhetoric of courtship provides a further means to understand the processes at work in such relationships.

Stowe argued that the world of the southern elite rested on a hierarchical scheme of values structured by a strong belief in family life and society. Furthermore he suggested that in the South gendered definitions and the values that were attributed to male and female behaviour and action were somewhat more extreme and loaded with

²⁵ Turner-Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Children*.

²⁶ *Ibid*, xv.

²⁷ *Ibid*. 19.

²⁸ Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*, 154.

meaning when compared to the beliefs and attitudes of their northern counterparts. He claimed that ‘...In particular, the definition of family and gender duties, the meaning of sexuality and the expectation of intimacy all were carried by a formal discourse which more sharply divided, even alienated, female from male.’²⁹ According to Stowe these clear forms of hierarchy in family life and gender relations were not only evident in planter consciousness, but also enjoyed and celebrated. Stowe claimed that showy displays of authority by elite southern men were acts of ritual that served to give substance to and bolster ideals of hierarchy and authority through appearance. Rituals such as the duel, courtship and marriage were positioned as outward displays of planter belief. Thus, Stowe concluded, appearance became linked to the ‘...essence of personal relationships, raising serious struggles for themselves of mastery and doubt, authority and intimacy, which were at the heart of the relations of life.’³⁰

The ritual of courtship was located in Stowe’s analysis as central to the southerner’s entrance into adult and family life. It was, Stowe claimed, a part of a formal and informal discourse, which placed emphasis on limits, good manners, and the conventions of gender. Stowe noted the increased significance of courtship during the early nineteenth century and also highlighted how changes in the importance of emotion as a key factor in establishing relationships placed courtship at a pivotal point in the history of couples. ‘A marriage was increasingly seen as a field for personal happiness...courtship became a mirror for youth’s sexual expression and ideals. Romantic love appeared in place of the ribaldry and blunt material calculation of the eighteenth century, casting both into relative disuse.’³¹ Stowe did not deny then the increased emphasis on emotions that some historians have limited to the northern states during this period. In fact, he argued that courtship became far more than a decorative

²⁹ *Ibid.* xvii-xviii.

³⁰ *Ibid.* xviii.

³¹ *Ibid.* 50.

part of a couple's relationship, embodying all that women and men wished to experience and wished to receive while with each other. Thus, '...the ritual [of courtship] became part of the ideological joinery...that linked the routines of private life to a larger sense of social meaning.'³²

The historiography had consequently developed to explore the specific nature of romantic life in the American South. Historians such as Turner-Censer and Stowe called attention to the intricacies and practicalities of falling in love for the southern elite. This served to expand the scope of the debate by moving beyond the question of whether the romantic ideal was fundamental to the world of the white southern elite. The developing historiography accepted the existence and significance of romantic love in the American South and began to consider how the idiosyncrasies of southern life would accommodate an ideal based on individual consent and expression of free will in a system that rested on the denial of freedom and individual consent.

3.4: Questioning the Location of the Enslaved in the Historiography of Courtship and Love

It is significant that none of the existing work on courtship and romantic love in the American South has considered the nature of these relationships in the lives of enslaved men and women. Yet, certain themes emerge in this historiography that are also applicable to an understanding of the nature of the courting experience for the enslaved. The historiography of white elite courtship raises useful questions about the relationships of the enslaved. One example is the issue of consent. Whilst Turner-Censer argued that young couples from the white planter classes were provided with a large degree of freedom from parental authority, thus preventing the union of a young couple solely on the basis of wealth or political ties, she also suggested that parents, relatives and friends had played an indirect role in courtship and marital decisions. It was

³² *Ibid.* 51.

important for most young couples from the southern white elite to receive the consent and blessing of their friends and relatives prior to their decision to marry.

The enslaved experienced the concept of consent in very different ways from their white master and mistress. As Chapter Five illustrates, the enslaved in theory required the permission of their master to leave the plantation, to establish a relationship with a particular person or to authenticate their relationship through a marriage ceremony. Yet, this consent was not always sought by the enslaved. As Chapter Six demonstrates enslaved men left the plantation at night without the authorisation of their owners in order to attend a frolic or to visit a particular woman on a neighbouring estate. Furthermore enslaved couples could and did marry without the full approval of their respective masters.

It is also necessary to consider whose consent the enslaved might have been required to seek in order to court and marry. Deborah Gray White has hinted at the influence of enslaved mothers in their daughter's romantic relationships, and Chapter Five of this thesis illustrates the influence of formerly enslaved men and women on the relationships of their children in the post-emancipation South.³³ This suggests that parental consent may have been a factor shaping the courting experience of the enslaved, although of course, for those enslaved men and women who did not live with or near their families, because of sale and subsequent separation, parental consent may not have been such a dominant issue in their courtship experiences. Yet, the influence of family members was a factor that probably impacted on a number of enslaved couple's courtships. Thus, whilst the concept of paternalism dictated that the main authority figure in the lives of the enslaved was that of the master, this was not necessarily reflected in the world of the enslaved, where they may have attached more significance to the role of their parents or other family members. Furthermore, whilst the permission of the master was usually obtained, this was often secondary to the feelings and

³³ See White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, Chapter Three, "The Life Cycle of the Female Slave", 95-97.

emotions of the two individuals involved. Common themes can then be found between the courting experiences of the enslaved and the white southern elite. Consent was an issue in defining the nature and shape of courtships for both. Although it is essential to retain an awareness of the differing context of consent in the worlds of the enslaved and the elite, it is possible to locate them together in the same discussion.

Another question that has structured the historiography of elite white courtship and that may be asked of enslaved courting relationships, concerns the social spaces and locations in which courtship occurred. Both Turner-Censer and Stowe considered the social context of courtship for the white southern elite and highlighted the spaces within which courtship took place. The nature of race and class relations in the antebellum South ensured that young North Carolinians socialised within particular circles, which governed the pool of partners they might choose from in terms of courtship and marriage. Turner-Censer argued that during the antebellum period, courtship occurred outside of the context of the home, which served to loosen the control that parents possessed over their children's personal relationships. In particular, both Turner-Censer and Stowe emphasised the significance of the ball as an arena in which men and women could establish courtships and compete for the attentions of the most eligible suitor.

In much of my own research the concept of courtship has emerged amongst the white planter class as something akin to a game in which men and women competed for the attentions of the most dashing beau or glamorous belle of the ball. The prospect of a forthcoming party or wedding created much excitement within the ranks of young North Carolinians. It was at such events that they might expect to be courted by an appropriate suitor or where they might catch the eye of a certain young lady. For example Charles Hamilton was encouraged by his cousin to attend a local wedding in Granville County, for as his cousin reminded him '...there will be great beauty & of course wit along with

it. Miss L Lewis the Brunswick idol is to be there in all her glory – Miss Siggits in all her notion simplicity & beauty.’³⁴

The belle was simultaneously admired and abhorred, both by the men who chased her and the women who envied her. Often her fellow guests maligned the belle of the evening for her excessive and over zealous attempts to attract the gentleman. In a letter to Jane Coleman written in 1836, Miss Mary was accorded the title of *belle of the evening* at a recent wedding yet she received no praise for her behaviour, ‘...she actually took the beaux by storm and seemed determined to carry the day with the gentlemen as she maintained her situation in the dance...She was very pretty when she was still but her beauty was spoilt by her manners.’³⁵

It was not only women who were forced to compete with each other in the arena of courtship. Men too faced intense rivalry when trying to establish a relationship. Joseph Davies wrote to his cousin Elizabeth Hargrove concerning his rival, Mr. A Burwell, in the competition for the attentions of a young lady named Fannie. Joseph wrote, ‘I am not at all afraid of that I know too well around what object Mr. B’s affections are centred to apprehend any danger from him...’³⁶ The public pursuit of a courtship was participated in by the young men and women of the elite planter class with a high degree of enthusiasm and a belief in the significance and social worth of these relationships.

Stowe has also argued that there were alternative settings, away from such public occasions as the ball, in which ideals of romance could be cultivated. Stowe suggested that romance was established as a particularly feminine terrain, and that this

³⁴ 25 April 1839, from Cousin Pat to Charles Hamilton, Bullock and Hamilton Family Papers, 1757-1971, series 2.1, fol. 15, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

³⁵ 28 January 1836, from Cas B. Coleman to Jane Coleman, Bullock and Hamilton Family Papers, 1757-1971, series 2.1, fol. 15, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

³⁶ 29 August 1848, from Joseph Davies, Chapel Hill, North Carolina to Elizabeth Hargrove, Elizabeth Hargrove Papers, 1817-1892, fol. 1, 1817-1859, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

was indulged by the novelists of the period who, through their work, created and set aside a social space for women to share an image of the ideal man shaped through stories of romantic love and passion. Stowe claimed that many believed the novel to be a barrier to the moral improvement of young women, yet beneath such warnings and concern he argued that there developed a social context for courtship ‘...a world of reading women, inventing love apart from men...’³⁷

Stowe further suggested that for elite southern women the safety and security of the world imagined in the novel contrasted uneasily with the rituals of display and conquest in the crowded ballrooms. For Stowe, courtship and romantic love amongst the white planter class in the Old South were established in two worlds or social settings; that which was invented by women in the fantasy world of the novel; and the reality of the ballroom or party where men were more completely in control. In essence, Stowe suggests that courtship divided the social world of the white southern elite into separate sexual spheres where young women were envisaged as ‘dreaming afternoons away with fictional images of ideal love...’ and young men were expected to participate in the ‘swift ritual of display and conquest in crowded ballrooms.’³⁸

This consideration of the social context of courtship and the spatial analysis offered in these arguments should lead to further questions regarding the social spaces that the enslaved were able to create both within and beyond the fixed, physical boundaries of the plantation. As Chapter Five illustrates courtship was the central activity of certain social events for the enslaved. This could include occasions that were presided over by the slave-owner such as corn shuckings, or more secret gatherings such as an illicit frolic. I shall provide a spatial analysis of enslaved courtship in Chapter Five, yet it is of interest to note at this point the specific and defined parameters governing the social context of courtship in the lives of the enslaved. Stephanie Camp has argued that

³⁷ Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*, 56.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 58.

the spatial environment of illicit parties and celebrations amongst the enslaved, where courtship was a central activity, represented a “rival geography” in which the enslaved negotiated an alternative mapping of plantation space.³⁹ The enslaved often attempted to establish their courting relationships beyond the physical boundaries of the plantation and thus removed from the direct control of the slave-owner. In much the same way that the courtships of the white southern elite began to occur outside of the home during the nineteenth century, thus loosening the bonds of parental control over such relationships, so the enslaved sought a similar autonomy by removing themselves off the plantation in order to establish and maintain these relationships.

It is also possible to consider the theme of competition and rivalry in the courtships of the enslaved. Chapter Four discusses the unbalanced sex ratio between enslaved men and women on the plantations of the American South, which undoubtedly contributed to a sense of competition amongst enslaved men, who at certain times and in particular locations outnumbered enslaved women by as much as 153:100.⁴⁰ As Chapter Seven indicates rivalry was such an integral part of the courtship experience for the enslaved that magic and charms were often employed in an attempt to win the heart of a suitor. Furthermore, the contest of courtship was a central theme of the folklore tales of the enslaved. The centrality of the courtship contest in these stories suggests that the enslaved understood courting relationships as part of a process of rivalry between male competitors. Certainly the enslaved had to overcome different obstacles to those placed in the path of the southern white elite in the arena of courtship. Nevertheless, the notion of competition is a useful theme that can be taken from the existing historiography concerning the courtships of the white southern elite and applied to those of the enslaved.

³⁹ Camp, “The Pleasures of Resistance”, 535.

⁴⁰ Lorin Lee Cary and Marvin L. Michael Kay, *Slavery in North Carolina 1748-1775*, (Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina, 1995), 161.

In considering the ways in which gendered relations structured the rules governing courtship in the South, Stephen Stowe's analysis highlights another area which can be applied to the courtship experiences of the enslaved. Stowe adapted an earlier argument made by Lawrence Stone concerning the shift from an oral to a written culture amongst the white elite in the eighteenth century. In the American South, Stowe argued that the increasing popularity of the written word, facilitated by the development of the publishing industry, became an appropriate means through which young men and women's behaviour could be governed and the courtship ritual could be shaped and directed by a prescribed set of values.⁴¹

Numerous treatises aimed at young men and women were published concerning good manners, morality and conduct, offering advice on ladylike and gentlemanly behaviour. Stowe pointed out that within those works directed at young women, discussions of male suitors and courtship was often vague and cautious, this silence loaded with meaning in itself. In fact, Stowe pointed out that 'None of the most popular authors devoted an entire chapter to courtship or even a sustained discussion.'⁴² For men, advice in the conduct of romance was perhaps even more unclear as moralists linked danger and fear for men with business, politics and competition with others. Women were assumed to be on the scene as wives, sisters or daughters but direct reference to them was rarely made. Stowe argued then that the advice of these moralists was '...a near paradox. Unlike any other focus of moral concern in this era of clear dichotomies, sexual passion had implications that were summoned by their very denial.'⁴³

The oral culture of the enslaved has left little overt evidence for the historian to begin to understand the inner dynamics of their intimate relationships. There were no

⁴¹ Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*, 51.

⁴² *Ibid.* 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 55.

moral treatises originating from the enslaved themselves, instructing enslaved men and women on how they should behave (particularly in the arena of courtship). Stowe has prioritised the written word in his own research arguing that the elite valued various forms of written discourse including letters, moral prescriptions, legal briefs and fiction.⁴⁴ Stowe suggested that these created a ‘kind of cultural grammar’ which also ‘defined a sense of who might (or must) communicate with whom, when and in what situations words were essential, what alternatives in expression were appropriate or not and how various genres tied into one another.’⁴⁵

The historian interested in the internal dynamics of enslaved life does not have such material at their disposal. In Stowe’s argument literacy is the key factor that changes the ways in which the southern elite could exchange and explore their values and ideals. Stowe pointed to the fact that the enslaved were excluded from the ability to master particular forms of discourse such as letter writing. Instead, it is within the verbal aspect of enslaved culture that the historian is able to unearth a wealth of material relating to enslaved understandings of courtship, romantic love, idealised gendered identities and the roles of men and women in the courting relationship. Chapter Seven of this thesis uses the folklore of the enslaved to illustrate how these stories reflected enslaved ideals, concerns and fears regarding the experiences of courtship. The tales were in many ways cautionary warnings to enslaved men in particular regarding the problems and processes of courtship. They were also essential in communicating what was considered as desirable and undesirable qualities in men and women, and how these gendered characteristics were played out in the arena of courtship. Much like the moral treatises that Stowe discussed, folklore can be used as a means to understand the theme of gender definitions and roles in the courting experiences of the enslaved.

⁴⁴ For a further discussion of the importance of letter writing between family members in the antebellum South see Steven Stowe, “The Rhetoric of Authority: The Making of Social Values in Planter Family Correspondence”, *Journal of American History*, 73 (March 1987), 916-33.

⁴⁵ Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*, 2.

Both Turner-Censer and Stowe have highlighted the ways in which southern planters looked inwards to their private and personal worlds for guidance and advice on courtship and love. In the antebellum northern states, romantic sentiment was used as a bar on family members interfering but in the South, Stowe argued ‘...love and the significance it lent to feelings seems to have drawn family and friends into an even tighter bond with lovers: romance was no bar to other relations of life or to the requirements of mastery.’⁴⁶ Stowe thus maintained that parental and kin influence was not a hierarchical relationship imbued with connotations of frustration and powerlessness. Even though parental influence over their children’s choice of marriage partner was lessening during this period, their advice was still sought and appreciated in matters of the heart.

This idea of parental and familial influence can also be used to understand the factors that shaped the courtships of enslaved couples. As Chapter Five demonstrates, enslaved men and women also looked to their friends and family for advice in choosing partners. Parental advice had an enduring affect on the relationships of children whose mothers and fathers had been enslaved. Couples who had met, courted and perhaps married during enslavement often imparted certain codes of conduct in courtship that they expected their children, more especially, their daughters, to abide by. The example set by their parent’s relationship was sometimes held up by the children of the enslaved, even after emancipation, as an illustration of how a relationship should proceed and the respective roles of men and women within this specific arena.

This chapter has suggested that the concept of romantic love should be understood as a historical construction, its shape being dependent upon specific historical and social circumstances. It has also illustrated the ways in which a historiography has developed concerning the ideal of romantic love and the processes of courtship in the Anglo-American world. It has established the richness of debate and the

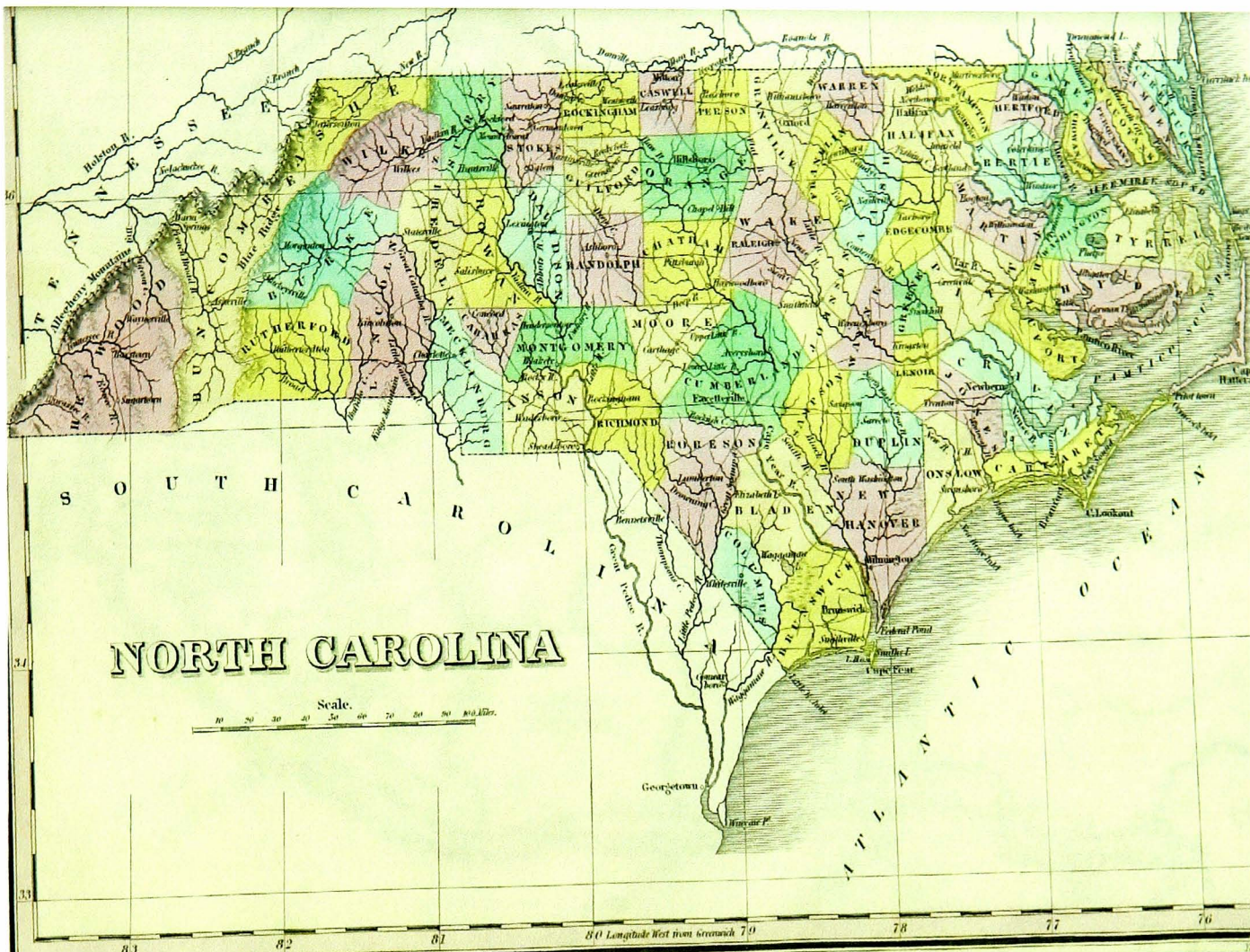
⁴⁶*Ibid.* 97.

wealth of material that is available to the historian interested in the development of love and romance on the North American mainland, with a particular attention to historical considerations of courtship amongst the southern white elite. This chapter has also sought to demonstrate the unnecessary neglect of the enslaved within this historiography. I have illustrated in the course of this chapter how it would be possible to incorporate themes from the current historiography into a historical analysis of enslaved courtship. By using the same arguments, themes and techniques of those debated and employed in the historiography of white southern elite courtship, yet using very different source materials, I have outlined the broad contours of how we might usefully study courtship and the romantic relationships of the enslaved.

PART II

ANALYSIS

Map 1.1: North Carolina, 1824



Source: http://www.cummingmapsociety.org/19thC_Maps.htm
 1824, A. Finley

Map 2.1 Showing West and Central African Slaving Regions



Adapted from: Theresa Singleton, "The Archaeology of the African Diaspora in the Americas" (Glassboro, New Jersey: Society for Historical Archaeology, 1995), cited by Jerome S. Handler and Michael L. Tuite Jr, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record*, www.gropius.lib.virginia.edu/slavery/index, Virginia University.

Chapter Four

North Carolina In Historical Context

4.1: Colonial Beginnings

The first European known to have explored the coast of what would eventually become North Carolina was the Florentine navigator, Giovanni de Verrazzona. He reached the mainland in 1524 in the service of the King of France. Despite Verrazzona's favourable report of the Atlantic coastline north of the Cape Fear, the French did not attempt to establish a settlement in the area. In fact, it was not until the late sixteenth century that the English settled the area, founding Jamestown in Virginia in 1607. An increased desire for land and profits saw a gradual movement by the early settlers to the lands that lay south from Virginia. In 1629, Charles I granted this southern expanse to Sir Robert Heath, the English attorney general. The region was named Carolana – the land of Charles.¹

Heath envisaged the area as a refuge for French Protestants, who had flooded into England following exile from their own country. However, neither Heath nor his successors established a colony. It was not until the Restoration of Charles II that a grant was made to a group of eight proprietors, in 1663, for the territory of what was by then known as "Carolina". Thus, direct control of the colony passed from royal authority to that of the new proprietors. Interest in this coastline focussed upon the south, which possessed numerous points of access to the Atlantic, as compared to the large bays of the north, which were protected by particularly long and hazardous outer banks.² Experienced settlers were invited from Barbados, Bermuda, Virginia and New England

¹ See *North Carolina: A Guide to the Old North State, Compiled and Written by the Federal Writers' Project of the Federal Works Agency. Works Project Administration for the State of North Carolina*, Sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Conservation and Development, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1939).

² See D. W. Meinig. *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Hundred Years of History, Vol. One, Atlantic America, 1492-1800*, (New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 1986), 173.

to establish themselves in the colony. Following a failed attempt in 1663, by a group of Puritans from Massachusetts Bay to create settlements in the Cape Fear region, a programme for colonisation was formally initiated a few years later, drawing upon leaders, settlers and resources from both England and Barbados.

The Governor of the entire province resided in Charles Town, which was established in 1670. The proprietors of Carolina continued to show little interest in the northern half of the region and between the years 1691 and 1712, a deputy was appointed to administer the government of this area of Carolina. However, by 1712, the territory of Carolina had developed into two distinct and specific colonies, North and South Carolina, and each gained their own Governor, signifying their independent status from each other. In 1729, North Carolina was brought back under royal control when George II purchased the region from the proprietors. So North Carolina remained, until the American War of Independence in 1775. After Independence North Carolina became one of the original thirteen states to sign the Republican Constitution in 1787.

It has been estimated that in 1663, the year in which the colony was granted to the landed proprietors, 35,000 Amerindians inhabited the area known as the Carolinas.³ Of the twenty or more indigenous nations that lived in the North of Carolina, the most numerically significant were the Cherokee, a tribe of Iroquoian descent, and the Tuscarora tribe. To the east were the Catawba tribe of Siouan descent whilst smaller groups had scattered across the expanse of land available to the south.⁴ The colonising projects of European nations led to encroachment on native land and resulted in the gradual destruction of Amerindian culture and society in the Carolinas. Moreover, European settlers brought with them a range of diseases against which natives had no immunity, and the indigenous population were largely decimated by periodic epidemics.

³ J H. Rand, *Indians of North Carolina and their Relations with the Settlers*, James Sprunt Historical Publications, Vol. XII, No 2, cited in Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1937), 8.

⁴ *North Carolina: A Guide to the Old North State*, "The Indians".

However, it was not until the mid nineteenth century that the last vestige of native dominance was destroyed in the region. In 1836, white settlers forcibly removed the Cherokee from the Appalachian region of North Carolina leaving the whole area open to white occupation.⁵

Early European settlers in the Carolinas were primarily drawn from colonists who had already established themselves in Virginia and the West Indies. Migration southwards from Virginia attracted men from the yeomanry class, who were in search of further land and resources, as well as servants who had finished their term of indenture and who sought to establish themselves within the colonial world. These non-elite whites had been excluded from acquiring land in Virginia by the presence of large-scale land speculators. For example, in 1658, thirty people alone held the title to over 100,000 acres of land in Virginia.⁶ In contrast, the north of Carolina offered land that was plentiful and cheap, presenting former servants and yeoman farmers with the opportunity for economic independence and personal freedom.

Such a movement of population created hostility between the two colonies of Virginia and Carolina. Conflict over land boundaries that separated Carolina from Virginia was a source of disagreement between the two colonies for many years. Settlers who had remained in Virginia rather than moving southwards to the Carolinas were fearful that the wave of outward migration would deplete their colony of human and economic resources, leaving the colony desolate. Thus elite Virginians began to represent the north of Carolina in an unfavourable light, suggesting that the colony harboured the poor, lazy and slothful in comparison to Virginia, which claimed a thriving, industrious and wealthy population. The Virginian William Byrd wrote in his *History of the Dividing Line* that North Carolina was ‘...at best isolated, undifferentiated & a wilderness inhabited by uncivilised rustics who paid no tribute either to God or

⁵ Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 8.

⁶ Fischer, *Suspect Relations*, 21.

Caesar.’⁷ Hence, colonial North Carolina was defined in the popular imagination as an undeveloped and uncivilised colony populated by the heathens and vagabonds rejected by its neighbouring colonies.

Unlike the early Chesapeake and New England, the Carolinas were among the first colonies in British North America to experience intercolonial migration. Settlers travelled overland from Virginia initially seeking to expand their own settlements of land. In 1720, South Carolina experienced an economic depression, which forced many settlers north, compelled by the large tracts of cheap and fertile land available in North Carolina. In addition to immigration from neighbouring colonies, dissenting Protestants from Pennsylvania, including Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers and Moravians, began to settle after 1750 in the backcountry of North Carolina. Amongst these groups were large numbers of Irish Protestants and Germans.⁸ Scotch highlanders also began arriving in the upper Cape Fear region in large numbers after 1745, following warfare and defeat in their homeland. These settlers were the only large group of white migrants to have arrived directly from their native land.⁹ (See Table 1.1).

In addition to this influx of settlers from neighbouring colonies, the Carolinas was also the destination of migrants from the islands of the Americas. The migration of planters from the West Indies, particularly Barbados, to the Carolinas exerted a major influence over the character of the early colony. These settlers were primarily drawn to the south of the region, in particular the Lower Cape Fear, where huge land resources, favourable climate and the local environment, offered the possibility for creating the same kind of sudden wealth that had attracted them to Barbados. As this chapter will discuss, counties such as New Hanover and Brunswick, which lay in this particular area

⁷ William Byrd, cited in A. Roger Ekirch, *“Poor Carolina” Politics and Society in Colonial North Carolina, 1729-1776*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1981), 20.

⁸ Ekirch, *“Poor Carolina”*, 6.

⁹ *North Carolina: A Guide to the Old North State*, 36.

became home to a thriving and wealthy North Carolinian elite and a large enslaved population.

Those Barbadians who arrived in the Carolinas during the 1670s and 1680s were a mixture of large and middling planters, merchants, artisans, small farmers, sailors, servants and slaves.¹⁰ Importantly, several of these planters acquired quite large tracts of land on their arrival in the Carolinas. Having emigrated from a profitable island economy that was already dependent on a system of enforced labour, it was evident that these planters intended to develop their wealth in this North American colony through the continued use of enslaved men and women. Slavery was thus established as the basic form of labour in the Carolinas from a particularly early point. Richard Dunn argues that whilst ‘...Slavery would have developed in colonial Carolina in any case, ...certainly the island migrants gave it an early boost.’¹¹

Thus, despite the influx of Protestant dissenters from colonies such as Pennsylvania, economic motivations rather than religious freedoms were foremost in the minds of the majority of settlers in early colonial North Carolina. Economic incentives were used in popular writings produced in the colonial period. These tracts aimed to entice more young men and their families to travel from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and the Caribbean as well as other colonies on the North American mainland, to the newly developing region of Carolina. John Brickell’s *Natural History of North Carolina* and John Lawson’s *History of Carolina* both celebrated the abundance of land, resources and natural environment which, John Brickell wrote, ‘...has induced a great many Families to leave the more Northerly Plantations, and come and settle on one of the mildest Governments in the World...’¹² However, as the next section of this chapter

¹⁰ Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713*. (Chapel Hill, London, University of North Carolina, 1972), 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 115.

¹² See John Brickell, *The Natural History of North Carolina With an Account of the Trade, Manners and Customs of the Christian and Indian Inhabitants...* (Dublin, James Carson, 1717), 30; John Lawson, “The History of Carolina Containing an Exact Description of the Inlets,

shall discuss, the guaranteed riches and unspoilt lands promised in tracts such as Brickell’s and Lawson’s were exposed on arrival by the stark realities and experiences of life in a young and developing colony.

Table 1.1: The Origins of Inhabitants of European Descent in North Carolina, 1790.¹³

Origin	Population	Percentage
English	240,309	83.1
Scotch	32, 388	11.2
German	8,097	2.8
Irish	6,651	2.3
French	869	0.3
Dutch	578	0.2
Other	290	0.1
Total	289, 182	100

The virtually land-locked status of North Carolina proved its fundamental handicap. Its entire sea front, nearly 300 miles long, was fringed by a series of narrow, shallow sounds, separated from the ocean by a chain of sand dunes and banks, and pierced by narrow inlets. (See map 1.1) Coastwise navigation was thus impracticable and dangerous.¹⁴ Excepting the port of Brunswick, located at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, there were no other means of access to the Atlantic Ocean for sea-going vessels. The Cape Fear River assumed importance within the colony as the principal means for

Havens Corn, Fruits, and other Vegetables of the Country Together with the Present State Therof. And a Journal of a Thousand Mile, Travel'd thro Several Nations of Indians. Giving a Particular Account of their Customs, Manners & C", (London and Dublin, 1737), *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

¹³ US census Office, "A Century of Population Growth", 117, cited in Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 9.

¹⁴ See Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 4.

importation, exportation and opportunities for widening the markets available to North Carolina. Yet, the river was only navigable from Wilmington to Fayetteville and its use in providing entry was limited for those living in the more remote areas of the colony. Consequently, the markets of North Carolina were often preoccupied with the servicing of the intra and intercolonial markets rather than the wider trade across the Atlantic. On the eve of the American Revolution for example, the West Indies was the chief importer of North Carolina's lumber products.¹⁵

The eighteenth century witnessed a significant expansion of settled territory in North Carolina as new counties were created, following a growth in numbers amongst the free population. However, this was not paralleled by economic expansion. By 1740 there were 13 counties in North Carolina. This had increased to 35 counties by 1776.¹⁶ Yet, the colony lacked a valuable export crop with which to build its wealth. Whilst Virginia had a flourishing economy based on the growth and exportation of tobacco, and South Carolina had begun to base its market around the staple commodity of rice, North Carolina's only comparable export produce, in terms of quantity was that of naval stores. Naval stores were vital for the expanding shipping and naval industry, and included products such as turpentine and tar which made up 40 percent of total exports from the colony. Wood products were the next most significant export, comprising 25 percent of the total'.¹⁷ Products such as tar, turpentine and lumber were the most stable of North Carolina's export produce and in fact no other colony produced these goods so extensively during this period. However, the profit from these exports was minimal in comparison to the returns made on export crops such as tobacco and rice in their neighbouring colonies.

¹⁵ Ekirch, "*Poor Carolina*" 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 8.

¹⁷ Cary and Kay, *Slavery in North Carolina 1748-1775*, 30.

North Carolina was dependent on the markets of South Carolina and Virginia for the sale and export of much of its produce, and this proved to be both costly and inefficient. High freight and insurance costs of goods shipped from North Carolina lessened the value of local exports while the cost of imports was heightened. This was to have immense significance for the colony's future as a slave-holding society. For example, in a letter written in 1741, Cullen Pollock, a wealthy slave-owner from Bertie County, lamented the effects of the poor navigation available in the colony. He wrote, '...the badness of our Navigation makes our land & slaves of very little profit to us...And as our navigation is bad so we have very few vessells except those that are very small, which makes freight excessive dear & very often not to be had at any rate...'¹⁸

4.2: Slaveholding in North Carolina

Cullen Pollack's observations intimately linked the problems of export in North Carolina with the economic profit to be derived from slaveholding in the colony. The lack of access to wider markets directly impacted on the scale and extent of slaveholding in the early colonial period. Men and women migrating from colonies such as Virginia were typically from the labouring classes or had previously been indentured servants. They arrived in the Carolinas seeking to advance their wealth and status through the acquisition of land. Many of these individuals were unable to farm efficiently without additional labour and were intent on using the hard toil of others on which to build their fortunes.

Slavery was officially sanctioned in the colony through an Act of Assembly passed in 1715.¹⁹ However, earlier efforts to encourage a labour system based on the

¹⁸ 20 December 1741, from Cullen Pollock to Nathaniel Duckinfield, cited in Ekirch, "*Poor Carolina*", 15.

¹⁹ Rosser Howard Taylor, *Slaveholding in North Carolina: An Economic View*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1926), 10.

enslavement of Africans were made by the Lords Proprietors, who had established a headright system in the colony, which granted a certain amount of acreage for every person or “head” brought into the region. This included the offer of fifty acres of land for each slave above the age of fourteen.²⁰ As previously discussed, many of the immigrants arriving in the Carolinas were Barbadian slave-holders, who had brought their slaves to the colony and indeed, had wanted to establish the Carolinas as a slave-holding society from the outset. These slave-holders settled in the Carolinas because of the diminished opportunities for slave-based plantation production in Barbados, where by the end of the eighteenth century, all the best and most fertile land belonged to a small number of wealthy and influential slave-holders.²¹ The incentive of land offered to those immigrants who arrived in the region with slaves was intended to attract further migrants from Barbados, as increasing numbers of small slave-holders sought to leave the heavily populated island and seek their fortune elsewhere. Despite such enticements, the number of enslaved Africans grew slowly and by 1712, they numbered only 800.²² This was largely owing to the predominance of small farmers in the area who were initially unable to afford the costs of additional labour in the form of slaves. During the colonial period the number of the enslaved in North Carolina grew gradually as table 1.2 illustrates below:

²⁰ *North Carolina: A Guide to the Old North State*, 37.

²¹ Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 115.

²² *North Carolina: A Guide to the Old North State*, 37.

Table 1.2: The Increasing Number of Slaves in Colonial North Carolina.²³

Year	Number of Slaves
1712	800
1730	6,000
1754	15,000
1765	30,000
1790	100,572

The chief demand for enslaved labour in the colony developed in the mid eighteenth century in connection with the cultivation of tobacco in the northern Albemarle Sound region. As the frontier extended, the geography of the tobacco culture moved westward, and the system of slavery thus expanded too.²⁴ The Cape Fear region, in the south of the colony, was also heavily dependent on the labour of the enslaved from the mid eighteenth onwards, where they were initially employed in the cultivation of rice. However, the land in this area could not produce the same levels of wealth that were derived from the cultivation of rice in South Carolina and thus the region became increasingly reliant on exports such as naval stores and lumber. Census returns in 1790 counted the white population in the colony at 288,204. The slave population, which numbered 100,572 by 1790, thus constituted twenty five per cent of the total population.²⁵ Yet the colony as whole was characterised by extreme regional diversity and the dispersal of enslaved Africans was uneven across the state with large numbers of the enslaved concentrated in those areas dependent on the cultivation of crops such as

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Taylor, *Slaveholding in North Carolina*, 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 18.

rice and tobacco. For example and as table 1.3 illustrates, during the decade of the 1760s, the majority of slave-owners in the Cape Fear region held a comparable number of slaves to those in the South Carolina low country. The most common holdings were between twenty to fifty slaves, which constituted a sizeable plantation and labour force in both areas. In fact, by 1767 blacks, both slave and free, comprised 62 per cent of the population in the Lower Cape Fear region, an area dependent on labour intensive crops such as rice, indigo and lumber products. The number of black people concentrated in this area rose from 1.4 per square mile in 1755 to 2.5 per square mile in 1767. In comparison in the far western counties of North Carolina, which typically cultivated a range of foodstuffs for local export and were not dependent on an enslaved labour force, blacks comprised only 8 per cent of the population in 1767.²⁶

Table 1.3: Proportion of Slaves on Plantations of Various Sizes in South Carolina’s Low Country, 1760-1769 and North Carolina’s Lower Cape Fear Region, 1762 – 1769.²⁷

Province	Years	Size of Slaveholding Unit						Number of slaves
		1-9	10-19	20-49	50-79	80-99	100+	
South Carolina	1760-69	12%	13%	35%	21%	7%	12%	23,732
North Carolina	1762-69	14%	11%	29%	22%	3%	21%	9,087

Apart from the Cape Fear region in the south of North Carolina and those counties around the Albemarle Sound in the north of the colony, the slave population did not increase at a rapid rate during the colonial period. However, as table 1.2 illustrates there was a rapid increase of the number of enslaved in the colony in the last quarter of

²⁶ Cary and Kay, *Slavery in North Carolina*, 22.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Table 1.6, Appendix, 231.

the eighteenth century. This was largely due to the expansion of settlement in the uplands and the enlargement of coastal plantations.²⁸ As table 1.6 suggests, these figures increased further in the course of the nineteenth century, when cotton began to emerge as the leading staple crop in many North Carolinian counties, especially in those areas south of the tobacco belt in the Piedmont and along the Coastal plain. The growth of cotton production on an extensive scale in North Carolina, combined with the increased number of settlements in the uplands and the growth of coastal plantations, created strong slaveholding areas in numerous regions.²⁹ The enslaved populations in these areas began to rapidly increase as local white farmers became increasingly dependent on the labour intensive crop of cotton, and consequently required the type of labour force that the system of slavery could offer.

By the 1830s cotton was a prosperous crop grown in many sections of North Carolina, and emerged as a staple crop in the eastern counties of Edgecombe, Bertie, Pitt, Martin and Lenoir and the south-western counties of Mecklenburg, Iredell, Anson and Richmond. Tobacco cultivation was confined to the northern Piedmont counties along the Virginian border, whilst eastern North Carolina retained its image as the turpentine belt. In the north-east of North Carolina large plantations flourished producing wheat and corn for export. The coastal regions of New Hanover and Brunswick continued to cultivate rice as their staple crop.³⁰ (See map 1.1). This economic progression was reinforced through the development of North Carolina's infrastructure, particularly in terms of its transportation and communication system. In 1852 the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad Company were chartered to connect the east and west counties. The project was completed in 1860 and although it failed to provide comprehensive coverage for all counties it did serve to enhance the economic

²⁸ Taylor, *Slaveholding in North Carolina*, 19.

²⁹ See *Ibid.* 35-36.

³⁰ Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 53.

opportunities available to many inhabitants of North Carolina who were subsequently exposed to wider expanding markets.³¹

There were then an increasing number of slave-holders within North Carolina during the first half of the nineteenth century. Table 1.4 illustrates the changing demographic profile of the population over the antebellum period. Whilst the white population increased only very slowly from 1790-1860, the number of slaves in the state rose at much higher levels. The slow increase of the white population can be attributed to emigration during the mid nineteenth century, as the western frontier opened up, and small farmers and slave-holders in North Carolina moved out of the state and sought to establish themselves elsewhere. In contrast, the rising number of slaves during the antebellum period suggests that participation in the system of slavery and ownership of at least one slave was rising amongst the free white population during this time.

The expansion of North Carolina's economy through the cultivation of a diverse number of export crops increased planters' reliance on slave labour. As table 1.4 indicates the enslaved population of North Carolina had steadily increased by the mid nineteenth century and the census of 1830 revealed that in specific counties the enslaved population had begun to outnumber that of the white population. As this chapter will discuss at greater length, the wealthy and powerful elite of North Carolina were established and contained within specific regions that were numerically dominated by the enslaved.

³¹ *Ibid.* 25.

Table 1.4: The Population of North Carolina, 1790-1860.³²

Year	Whites	Increase Per Cent	Free Coloured	Increase Per Cent	Slaves	Increase Per Cent	Total
1790	288,204		4, 975		100,572		393,751
1800	337,764	17.19	7,043	41.56	133,296	32.53	478,103
1810	376,410	11.44	10,266	45.76	168,824	26.65	555,500
1820	419,200	11.36	14,612	42.33	205,017	21.43	638,829
1830	472,823	12.79	19,534	33.74	245,601	19.79	737,987
1840	484,870	2.54	22,732	16.31	245,817	.08	753,419
1850	553,028	14.05	27,463	20.81	288,548	17.38	869,039
1860	629,942	14.42	30,463	10.92	331,059	14.73	992,622

Table 1.5 below reflects the growing numbers of the enslaved in counties that were heavily dependent on labour intensive crops. In Brunswick, for example, where the cultivation of rice formed the backbone of the economy, the enslaved population had begun to outnumber that of the local white population by 1830. Moreover, during the same year, in regions such as Halifax County, an area reliant on tobacco crops, the enslaved population was nearly double that of its white counterparts. In comparison, in Buncombe County, which lay in the mountainous western region of the state the number of enslaved was minimal in comparison to the white population in this area.

³² John Spencer Bassett, *Slavery in North Carolina*, www.docsouth.unc.edu/nc/bassett99.html, July 2003.

Table 1.5: Comparison of White and Enslaved Populations in Six Counties of North Carolina, 1830.³³

County	Whites	Slaves
Anson	9,146	4,772
Buncombe	14, 494	1,572
Brunswick	3,014	3,101
Halifax	5,870	9,790
Lenoir	3,734	3,875
Warren	4,259	7,327

The number of large slaveholders in North Carolina, typically those owning over 50 slaves, was limited to particular geographic areas of the state. However, by 1860, the majority of white inhabitants of North Carolina owned at least one slave, and participated in maintaining and perpetuating the system of slavery. Guion Griffis Johnson has argued that ‘The large slaveholders, those few who owned from 50 to 200 slaves, give colour to the picture of ante-bellum North Carolina, but the small slaveholders actually shaped the character of slavery in the state because they were in the majority.’³⁴ Table 1.6 below illustrates the growing significance of slaveholding in North Carolina and the expansion of slave ownership by 1860. As the table demonstrates, the most significant increase during the first half of the nineteenth century was concentrated in the lower numerical end of slave-holdings, particularly among those slave-owners who held a slave population ranging from two up to twenty. However, there is also increase amongst those slave owners who held a slave population ranging from 100-300. From 1790 to 1850 this number increased by 75.

³³ Census of North Carolina, 1830, Christian Almanac for North Carolina, 1832, 17-18, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

³⁴ Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 469.

Table 1.6: Slaveholding in North Carolina, 1790, 1850, 1860.³⁵

Number of Slaves	1790	1850	1860
1 Slave	4,040	1,204*	6,440
2+ under 5	4,959	9,668	9,631
5+ under 10	3,375	8,129	8,449
10+ under 20	1,788	5,898	6,073
20+ under 50	701	2,828	3,321
50+ under 100	90	485	611
100+ under 200	11	76	118
200+ under 300	2	12	11
300+ under 500	0	3	4

4.3: ‘The ridicule was the silk shoes in such a place...’³⁶: The Establishment of a North Carolinian Elite

Small landholders, with few holding more than 100 acres, dominated the North Carolinian landscape. By 1860, only 311 plantations in the entire state contained more than a thousand acres.³⁷ This pattern of small land-holding perhaps helps to explain why antebellum North Carolina was characterised in the popular imagination as a poor relation to South Carolina, its more prosperous neighbour. Likened to Rip Van Winkle by the *New York Evening Star*, North Carolina became the punch line of political satire and social commentaries. ‘During her heavy slumber she has, like Rip Van Winkle

³⁵ US Census Office, Agriculture in the US in 1860, 235-6, cited in *Ibid.* 55. * Error in reporting for 1850. Slaveholders reporting owning one slave (1,204) yet by 1860 this number has increased fivefold (6,440). No comparable increase in other states during this period.

³⁶ Janet Schaw, *A Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina and Portugal in the Years 1774-1776*, Evangeline Walker Andrews and Charles McLean Andrews, [eds.], (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1923), 154.

³⁷ US Census Office, Agriculture in the US in 1860, cited in Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 55.

grown poor and ragged (wrote the *New York Evening Star*) permitting her native energies and strength to lie for so protracted a period dormant and unemployed.’³⁸

The white population of North Carolina were characterised in similar terms. This chapter has already discussed the ways in which Virginians such as William Byrd defined the colonial inhabitants of this *undifferentiated wilderness*. The image of North Carolinians as uncivilised and backward persisted into the antebellum period, and was underlined by the comparatively small slave population. Life was relatively simple and there were few of the huge columned mansions that dotted the landscape of South Carolina. The majority of inhabitants lived in plain, rude log cabins. Frederick Olmstead recounted his shock at entering such a log cabin with only two rooms, occupied by ‘...more scanty and rude [furniture] than I ever saw before in any house, with women living in it, in the United States.’ Yet, to his added amazement, he remarked that ‘...these people were not so poor, but that they had a negro woman cutting and bringing wood for their fire.’³⁹

Members of the elite classes who visited the state from northern cities expressed a certain level of disbelief at the “backward” lifestyle led by the inhabitants of North Carolina. Several commented on the lack of finery and wealth on parade in the state, especially in comparison to larger towns and cities such as Charleston in neighbouring South Carolina, or further north in places such as New York, as well as in contrast to the ostentatious lifestyle of planters in the West Indies. Writing in the eighteenth century, Janet Schaw, who had travelled from Scotland via the West Indies, ridiculed the display of style at a ball she had attended in Wilmington, ‘...Let it suffice to say that a ball we had, where were dresses, dancing and ceremonies laughable enough, but there was no object on which my own ridicule fixed equal to myself and the figure I made, dressed

³⁸ 27 December 1833, quoted in the *Raleigh Star*, cited in Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 21.

³⁹ Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States 1853-4*, (New York, Dix & Edwards, 1856), 330.

out in all my British airs with a high head and a hoop and trudging thro' the unpaved streets in embroidered shoes...No chair, no carriage – good leather shoes need none. The ridicule was the silk shoes in such a place.'⁴⁰ Nearly a century later, in 1853, Sarah F. Hicks moved to North Carolina from New York, following her marriage to Dr. Benjamin Williams. In a letter to her parents, she wrote that 'I find my wardrobe quite too extravagant...You have no idea how entirely different everything here is. If you call Long Island behind the time, I don't know what you would call North Carolina. It has been rightly termed Rip Van Winkle.'⁴¹

North Carolina was thus characterised as a struggling and poor state inhabited by relatively simple and plain white people. Yet in areas such as the Cape Fear region, the Piedmont and the Albemarle Sound where the cultivation of labour intensive crops demanded large workforces and provided extensive profits in return, it was possible to witness the development of a white slave-holding elite, whose wealth was derived from the profitable returns made on the export of such crops. This elite group of slave-owners typically owned over fifty slaves and included men such as Charles Pettigrew of Washington County who owned 157 slaves in 1850.⁴² Just sixteen slave-owners owned nearly half the slaves in Washington County.⁴³ This group thus formed a wealthy and distinct social elite in the region who were governed by social customs and norms common to the slave-holding elite elsewhere in the antebellum South.

Despite the disparaging comments made by observers such as Sarah Hicks Williams and Janet Schaw the slave-holding elite in North Carolina did indulge in a conspicuous display of their wealth, finery, and style, especially at social occasions such

⁴⁰ Schaw, *A Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 154.

⁴¹ 17 November 1853, from Sarah F. Hicks Williams, Greene County, to Mr. & Mrs. Samuel Hicks, New Hartford, Sarah F. Hicks Williams Letters, 1836-1868, fol. 4, 1853, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

⁴² Wayne K. Durrill, "Routine of Seasons: Labour Regimes and Social Ritual in an Antebellum Plantation Community", *Slavery and Abolition*, 16, (August 1995), 161-187, 165.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

as parties and balls. For example, James Hamilton wrote in a letter to Charles Hamilton that at a Christmas party he had attended he had experienced the ‘...pleasure of dancing with many of the beauties of Granville.’⁴⁴ Similarly, Elizabeth Hargrove received a letter from J. Davis describing a recent party he had attended, ‘We had a very lively celebration at Louisburg; all the Franklin ladies were there, and of course we had a fine display of beauty...’⁴⁵ Social events thus provided the opportunity for the slave-holding elite to show themselves off and socialise with each other. Entry into the world of the slave-holding elite in North Carolina was restricted to those who already understood and operated on the basis that wealth was dependent on the ownership of an enslaved labour force.

4.4: North Carolina’s Slave Trade

Opportunities to accumulate wealth through slavery and the subsequent establishment of a slave-owning elite were hampered in the colonial period of North Carolina’s history by the limited role the colony was able to play in the slave trade. North Carolina’s lack of access to the Atlantic meant that it was largely dependent on the neighbouring states of South Carolina and Virginia to provide slaves from Africa and the West Indies. Historians Marvin Kay and Lorin Lee Cary have estimated that during the years 1755 and 1767, 8000 slaves were transported overland to North Carolina. They also argue that the number of slaves imported by sea routes for the same period was probably only 3000.⁴⁶ Slaves arriving via sea vessels often came in from other American colonies or the West Indies and may also have spent an extended period of time in such places as Jamaica or Barbados. Thus, they suggested that the percentage of slaves

⁴⁴ 23 January 1839, from James A. Hamilton to Charles Hamilton, Bullock and Hamilton Family Papers, 1757-1971, series 2, fol. 17, 1839, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

⁴⁵ 21 July 1848, from J. J. Davis, Elizabeth to Elizabeth Hargrove, Elizabeth Hargrove Papers, 1817-1892, fol. 1, 1817-1859, *Rare Book and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

⁴⁶ Cary and Kay. *Slavery in North Carolina*, 21.

arriving directly from Africa in North Carolina during the period of the slave trade was so small that it is impossible to accurately calculate the ethnic origins of the colony's slaves.⁴⁷

It might be reasonable to assume however, that the northern counties of North Carolina had a slave population more closely resembling that of Virginia, whilst the southern counties were more typical of South Carolina. Counties in the south of the colony, such as Brunswick, where rice was the primary staple commodity and plantations were particularly large, held much in common with the social and economic characteristics of South Carolina. Similarly, counties such as Halifax that bordered Virginia in the northern region shared similar characteristics to that particular colony. Most significantly, these northern counties were incorporated into an economy based upon the cultivation of tobacco, which was fundamental to the continuing wealth of Virginia. That these areas were already integrated into the economies of their neighbouring colonies suggests that it would not be surprising to discover similarities in the make-up of their respective slave populations.

Elizabeth Donnan's *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America* demonstrated that between the years of 1733-1785, 65,466 slaves were imported into South Carolina directly from Africa. Of this number, 18,240 came from the Guinea coast, 11,485 from Angola and 10,924 from the Congo.⁴⁸ (See map 2.1). Lorena Walsh provided comparable figures for the Chesapeake slave trade during the eighteenth century, claiming that nearly '...three-quarters of Africans disembarked in the Lower Chesapeake (York and Upper James Basins) came from more southerly parts of Africa east and south of the Bight of Benin, from the Bight of Biafra (present-day eastern Nigeria) and West Central Africa (termed Kongo and Angola in contemporary

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America*, (Carnegie Institution Publication, No 409, Vols. I-IV, 1930-35), Vol. IV, 278.

sources).⁴⁹ (See map 2.1) Based upon this evidence therefore, we can suggest that the enslaved in the southern counties of North Carolina who arrived overland via South Carolina were largely drawn from the Guinea Coast and Angola. For those who inhabited the northern counties and had been imported from Virginia it is possible to suggest that they originated from more southerly regions of Africa, such as the Bight of Biafra.

Early accounts of North Carolina, such as that of John Brickell's *Natural History of North Carolina*, made references to the origins of the African slaves in the colony and suggested that many were from the Guinea coast of West Africa. Brickell stated that 'The Negroes are sold on the coast of Guinea to Merchants trading to those parts, are brought from thence to Carolina, Virginia and other Provinces in the hands of the English...'⁵⁰ As late as the nineteenth century, Dr. Edward Warren recalled in his memoirs that in his early days in North Carolina '...there were still living several old men who were known as "Guinea negroes," being the remnants of the cargoes of African slaves which certain enterprising New England traders had brought into those waters and sold at handsome prices to neighbouring planters.'⁵¹ A certain number of the enslaved in early colonial North Carolina apparently then originated from the Guinea Coast in West Africa, although they may have arrived on the North American mainland in the neighbouring colonies of South Carolina or Virginia, or at these particular locations via the West Indies.

Unlike their neighbours, North Carolinians were unable to exercise the same preference of choice over the origins of their slave populations. Their dependence on the slave markets of South Carolina and Virginia created a situation where North Carolinian

⁴⁹ Lorena Walsh, "The Chesapeake Slave Trade: Regional Patterns, African Origins and some Implications", *William and Mary Quarterly*, LVIII (January 2001), No 1, 139-165, 145.

⁵⁰ Brickell, *The Natural History of North Carolina*, 272.

⁵¹ Edward Warren, "A Doctor's Experience in Three Continents: In A Series of Letters Addressed to John Morris M.D of Baltimore" (Cushings and Bailey Publishers, 1885), *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*, 200.

slave-owners were not given first choice on the slaves they wished to purchase. It was highly likely for example that when buying slaves from South Carolina, those originating from the Bight of Biafra would dominate the selection available to North Carolinians. This was based on the particular prejudices of the South Carolinian slave-owners, who favoured slaves from the Gold Coast and the Senegambia, but were particularly hostile to those from the Bight of Biafra and also any slave who was considered short in stature, possibly as evidence of a sickly character.⁵² These prejudices were based upon preconceived ideas and stereotypes of the character of particular African ethnicities. North Carolinian slave-owners were consequently limited in their choice of slaves as they were likely to receive those who had not sold in the markets of South Carolina or Virginia. As Governor Burrington remarked in 1733 concerning the slave trade to North Carolina, ‘...Great is the loss this country has sustained in not being supplied by vessels from Guinea with Negroes...As none come directly from Africa, we are under a necessity to buy the refuse [,] refractory and distemper’d Negroes brought from other governments.’⁵³

Despite this reliance on overland imports to North Carolina, more recent work has suggested that a large minority of slaves were brought directly into North Carolina from the West Indies, through seaborne imports.⁵⁴ A large number of the enslaved in the early colony had arrived with their masters and mistresses from the West Indies, and the trade in slaves continued between the mainland and the islands throughout the eighteenth century. Minchinton argued that 3,236 slaves were brought by sea into North Carolina from 1702 to 1790, with almost half coming from the West Indies.⁵⁵

⁵² See Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Consensus*, (Madison, Milwaukee, London, University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 157.

⁵³ Governor Burrington, 1733, cited in Johnson, *Antebellum North Carolina*, 470.

⁵⁴ See Walter Minchinton, "The Seaborne Slave Trade of North Carolina", *The North Carolina Historical Review*, LXXI (January 1994), No 1, 1-63.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 23.

Minchinton's analysis holds important implications for the discussion of slavery and the experiences of the enslaved in North Carolina. Enslaved men and women arriving in North Carolina from the West Indies would have been seasoned by their experiences of enslavement in the colonies. Moreover, there were already a significant number of enslaved men and women in the colony who either originated from, or had experienced, the West Indies. Consequently, cultural crossovers would have existed, not only direct from Africa, but also from customs and practices developed in the West Indies in colonies such as Jamaica and Barbados.⁵⁶

By 1807 the external slave trade with Africa was outlawed and states on the North American mainland were forced to rely on methods of natural increase and the expansion of the domestic slave trade across the South, as well as the continuing practice of illegal importation. It would seem however that North Carolina had achieved the natural reproduction of its enslaved population much earlier than the nineteenth century. Writing in the early eighteenth century John Brickell suggested that the slave who had been born in North Carolina had proved to be of a much better character than those of African origins, '*There are great Numbers of them born here, which prove more industrious; honest and better Slaves than any brought from Guinea.*'⁵⁷ Perhaps, for a colony that was largely reliant on the markets of its neighbours to supply the imports of its slaves, a reliance on the natural increase of its enslaved population was promoted at a much earlier date than elsewhere on the North American mainland.

⁵⁶ One such example of this may be found in the custom widely practiced in the West Indies, particularly Jamaica, of *John Koonering*. On the North American mainland North Carolina was the only state where this custom was known to be practiced amongst the African-American slave communities. It has been argued that this element of slave life in North Carolina was derived from experiences in the West Indies, rather than directly from Africa. The John Kooner parade will be discussed in greater depth in the course of this chapter.

⁵⁷ Brickell, *The Natural History of North Carolina*, 272. (emphasis added).

4.5: The Experience of Enslavement in North Carolina

As this chapter has already discussed North Carolina was comprised of distinct and diverse economic districts that were based on the export of specific crops or produce. The work regimes of the enslaved were dictated in each district by the specific demands of these particular goods. Whilst this thesis is not concerned with examining how these differing work regimes affected the nature of courtship for the enslaved, it is important to examine the type of labour demanded from the enslaved in North Carolina. The work routines of the enslaved were fundamental to the wider dynamics of enslaved life and as Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan have argued, ‘...the legacy of slavery cannot be understood without a full appreciation of the way in which slaves worked.’⁵⁸ Slaves were after all, defined first and foremost in the minds of their white masters and mistresses, and in legal terms, as labourers, and wider aspects of enslaved life, such as courtship and social relationships, were primarily shaped by the dictates of their work regimes. For example, periods of the agricultural season that demanded intense physical labour may have resulted in less time and energy on the part of the enslaved to engage in socialising or visiting loved ones on neighbouring plantations. Enslaved labourers who were not part of plantation or farm life but worked in the growing industries of North Carolina, such as that of turpentine and naval products, generally lived in camps located within the pine forests and isolated from contact with the wider enslaved community. Opportunities for intra-plantation socialising were thus limited by the nature of their work and the conditions in which they lived.

Many field slaves did not specialise in the cultivation of a single crop, but grew and harvested a variety of produce, including corn, wheat and cotton, and also worked at raising cattle and hogs and maintaining and improving the land. For example William Pettigrew, a slave owner and planter from Washington County, listed his real property in

⁵⁸ Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, cited in Robert B. Outland III, “Slavery, Work and the Geography of the North Carolina Naval Stores Industry, 1835-1860”, *Journal of Southern History*, LXII (February 1996), No 1, 27-56, 27.

1860 as including three horses, twenty mules, six milk cows, sixteen working oxen, ten beef cattle, fifty-three sheep and ninety-six swine. In 1859 his fifty-six slaves at Magnolia, his plantation, had raised 9,000 bushels of corn, 500 bushels of sweet potatoes, 50,000 pounds of fodder and 300 bushels of peas. They had also manufactured 150 pounds of butter and 100 yards of cloth from locally grown flax and wool.⁵⁹ Large plantations thus not only produced goods for wider markets but also grew and manufactured produce for home consumption.

For enslaved men and women based on such plantations, labour demands could be multiple and varied. A gang labour system, which required less specialisation in terms of labour skills, and ensured that the diverse needs of the plantation system were met, operated on the majority of North Carolinian plantations. This was in contrast to the task system, common in the South Carolina low country, and which called for specific skills that were concentrated on a particular task.⁶⁰ The major difference between the two labour systems was that gang labour ensured that slaves toiled for as long as possible each day, while the task system functioned on the basis that as soon as a slave's allotted tasks were completed any time left in the day was their own to spend as they wished. Enslaved men and women in North Carolina recalled long days in the field and rarely referred to a system that reflected tasking in their work. For example, Charlie Barbour, enslaved in Johnston County, remarked that his master '...wucked his niggers from daylight till dark, an' his thirteen grown slaves had ter ten' 'bout three hundred acres o' land...dey mostly planted co'n, peas an' vege'ables.'⁶¹ Henry Bobbitt who had belonged to Richard Bobbitt of Warren County, also reported this type of labour system and diversity of crops in his recollections of enslavement, '...We farmed, makin'

⁵⁹ William Pettigrew, *Taxation Assets at Magnolia, 1860*, cited in Durrill, "Routine of Seasons", 166.

⁶⁰ See Hudson, *To Have and To Hold*, Chapter One "For Better or Worse: Slaves' World of Work."

⁶¹ Charlie Barbour, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 74-5.

tobacco, cotton, co'n, wheat an' taters. Massa Dick had a whole passel o' fine horses an' our Sunday job wuz ter take care of 'em, an' clean up round de house. Yes mam, we wucked seben days a week, from sunup till sundown six days, an' from seben till three or four on a Sunday.'⁶²

Historians such as Larry Hudson have argued that the task system as it operated in antebellum South Carolina allowed the enslaved more autonomy, because it provided them with the time and means to work for themselves, cultivating their own plots of land in order to sell their produce and accumulate certain goods for themselves.⁶³ Hudson further suggested that the garden system facilitated the development of the slaves' internal economy largely of their own making, '...the slaves' increasing economic independence facilitated the development of real "space" between their world and that of the masters wherein they could enjoy a level of cultural autonomy.'⁶⁴ Despite the absence of the task system on a number of the North Carolinian plantations, many amongst the formerly enslaved who were interviewed for the WPA narratives, did recall the possession of such gardens.⁶⁵ Because the enslaved were expected to work for their owner from sunrise till dark, these plots were cultivated during the evenings after a day of work on the field. John Bectom remembered that his grandmother '...plowed till dusk-dark before they left the fields to come to the house...They gave the slaves an acre of ground to plant and they could sell the crop and have the money. The work on this

⁶² Henry Bobbitt, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 121.

⁶³ See Hudson, *To Have and To Hold*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 20.

⁶⁵ The image that emerges from the North Carolina narratives is that the ownership and maintenance of a garden patch was a family duty amongst the enslaved. Men and women from the same household or family worked their gardens together, and although they may have divided certain tasks between themselves on the basis of gender, there seems to have been little gender differentiation in terms of actual ownership. Alternatively, other aspects of the informal economy, such as the sale of charcoal, might have resulted in the enslaved having to leave the plantation in order to exchange such goods at market, and thus these activities seem to have been primarily undertaken by enslaved men.

acre was done on moonshiny nights and holidays.’⁶⁶ Similarly, Hannah Crasson, whose parents were enslaved in Wake County, recalled that her mother and father ‘...worked their patches by moonlight; and worked for the white folks in the day time. They sold what they made...’⁶⁷

The gang labour system did not prevent the enslaved from attaining some degree of autonomy from the world of their white master. The provision of gardens allowed many of the enslaved in North Carolina to create a sense of economic independence and a degree of cultural autonomy from their master. However, they were unable to appropriate their labour time during the day, as a tasked slave would have been able to. Instead, most enslaved men and women in North Carolina were forced to use their own free time, during the evenings, weekends, and holidays, to accumulate produce and goods with which to trade.

The garden system in North Carolina exposed one of the central ironies that structured the lives of the enslaved during the antebellum period. The enslaved undoubtedly drew a sense of pride and achievement from the produce they cultivated on their own plots of land, which subsequently afforded them a degree of economic independence. For example, Hannah Crasson proudly recalled that her enslaved father ‘...made a barrel of rice every year...’⁶⁸ Yet slave-owners also benefited from this arrangement. Not only did they believe that the cultivation of small plots of land engendered a sense of industry and enterprise in their workforce, but the slave-owner also saw economic advantage to a system that resulted in their slaves supplementing the scant rations of the plantation. Hudson asserted that by, ‘...encouraging an economic “busyness” in their slaves, masters, of course, gained a formidable method of controlling

⁶⁶ John C. Bectom, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 93.

⁶⁷ Hannah Crasson, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 188.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

and disciplining slaves who relied increasingly upon work done in their gardens to augment their daily or weekly allowance and improve their standard of living.’⁶⁹

Mark M. Smith, in his excellent analysis concerning the concept of clock time as it developed in the antebellum South, has made the point that on most plantations all time was ultimately that of the master’s, including “off time”.⁷⁰ The very fact that enslaved men and women worked their garden plots on moonlit nights or during the holidays, and that slave-owners saw material and ideological advantages to such a system, reinforces this point. The enslaved were allowed to work for themselves only during times at which the slave-owner did not directly require their labour on the plantation. The slave-owner consequently authorised this “free time”.

Furthermore, in working for themselves the enslaved were still servicing the economic needs of the slave-owner through supplementing the meagre rations provided on the plantation. Even in this authorised free time they were working for the benefit of the slave-owner. The gang labour system that structured the daily work life of North Carolina’s enslaved, did not adhere to mechanised clock time as rigidly as that of the task system, for in the gang labour system the enslaved were expected to work from sunrise to sunset whereas in the task system specific jobs were expected to take a specified amount of time. Yet gang labour was still bound by concepts of both natural time, in terms of sunrise or sunset, and that of mechanised, regulated time, which, as Smith argues, were not mutually exclusive. Specifics of time did serve to regulate and control the lives of the enslaved in North Carolina, including those periods of “off time”, which they considered as their own.

Several of the WPA respondents recalled the sounding of the horn or the ringing of the plantation bell as symbolic of their regulated workday. Abner Jordan’s father was

⁶⁹ Hudson, *To Have and To Hold*, 11.

⁷⁰ See Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery and Freedom in the American South*, (Chapel Hill, London, University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 123-125.

the blacksmith and the foreman on Paul Cameron's plantation, Staggeville, in Durham County. Abner recalled that his father '...blew de horn for de other niggahs to come in from de fiel' at night.'⁷¹ Occasionally the horn and the plantation bell would be used on the plantation to signify different times in the working day. Julius Nelson, who was enslaved in Anson County, remembered that, '...de ho'n blowed 'fore de light o' de day an' how we got up an' had our breakfast an' when de ho'n blowed at sunrise we went ter de fiel's in a gallop. At dinner time de plantation bell rung an' we'd fly fer home.'⁷² The sounding of the horn or the ringing of the plantation bell also regulated the free time of the enslaved. It was not until the day's labour was done or the season's harvest completed that the slave-owner granted his slaves some "off time". As Smith has argued, '...because the actual, absolute ownership of time was nonnegotiable, masters and slaves came to accept and realise that all time on the plantation, whether work or leisure, was ultimately the master's to bestow, manipulate and define.'⁷³

As Chapters Five and Six argue enslaved men and women did resist these claims of authority over the slave-owner's ultimate ownership of their time. This was evidenced for instance, in their leaving the plantations at night without permission to attend local frolics, generally held in secret beyond the physical boundaries of the home plantation. However, as Chapter's Five and Six also discuss, the master's ownership of the slave's physical body, the spaces that this body inhabited, and the ultimate control the slave-owner had over the ways in which the enslaved spent their time, had a profound effect on the structure of enslaved life on North Carolinian plantations and farms.

The enslaved employed in the fields of the plantation may have been able to acquire a greater degree of independence and influence over their rights to "off time"

⁷¹ Abner Jordan, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 35.

⁷² Julius Nelson, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 144.

⁷³ Smith, *Mastered by the Clock*, 123.

when compared to the enslaved domestic, who was employed in the house of the slave-owner. Certainly slave-owners attached a high value to those amongst the enslaved who were employed within the domestic quarters or those who possessed a particular skill or trade. This is documented in the private papers of slave-owners who often listed their slave population for tax and sale purposes. For example, in the Davidson Family papers, based in Iredell County, a list of the plantation slaves revealed a slave named Henry, who was listed as a blacksmith and was priced at \$1200. Henry was counted as one of the most economically valuable slaves on the plantation, with the average value of other male slaves on the plantation ranging from \$450 to \$900.⁷⁴

If a plantation was especially large the slave-owner required numerous members of the enslaved to work as domestics in the house or to be equipped with certain skills. Michael Cronly, who was based in Wilmington, listed several such slaves in his accounts during 1865, including a cook, seamstress, nurse, chambermaid, baker, waitress, gardener, wood cutter, carriage driver and carpenter.⁷⁵ Similarly, among the slaves on the McRae plantation in Fayetteville, there was a bricklayer, cook, coachman, blacksmith and midwife listed in 1855.⁷⁶ Slaves who were possessed of particular skills could also be hired out to neighbouring plantations and thus they promised their master and mistress a high economic return.

However, despite the economic value placed on these members of the enslaved population by slave-owners, recollections from the WPA narratives revealed that the enslaved domestic's life was often characterised by cruel and brutal treatment at the hands of the master and mistress. For example, Cornelia Andrews remembered being

⁷⁴ Davidson Family Papers, 1748-1887, box 3 of 3, fol. 1, correspondence, nd, and receipts, 1802-1877, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

⁷⁵ Cronly Family Papers, 1806-1944, box 1, fol. 1, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

⁷⁶ McRae Plantation Memorandum Book, 1792-1878, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

whipped in public for ‘...breaking dishes an’ being slow...’⁷⁷ Severe and watchful mistresses could make the life of the house slave particularly difficult. Ida Adkins who was enslaved in Louisburg, Franklin County, recalled that her mistress, Mis’ Mary Jane was ‘...quick as er whip-po’-will. She had black eyes dat snapped an’ dey seed everythin’. She could turn her head so quick dat she’d ketch you every time you tried to steal a lump of sugar.’⁷⁸

Enslaved domestics were also subject to the capricious whims of their masters and mistresses, as was the case in the household of Dr Flint, the master of Harriet Jacobs. Harriet recalled in her narrative that the cook of the household ‘...never sent a dinner to his table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whipped, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence. The poor, hungry creature might not have objected to eating it; but she did object to having her master cram it down her throat till she choked.’⁷⁹ Under the constant scrutiny of their master and mistress and required to be constantly available, day and night, in order to attend to the needs of the slave-owner, the enslaved domestic may have found that they had little time in which to pursue their own social relationships or establish courtships.

4.6: The Social Calendar of the Enslaved

The appropriation of time by the enslaved was then restricted by the demands of labour. However, for the enslaved employed in field labour this was also dependent on the nature of the seasons as well as the will of the slave-owner. Winter months were spent by the enslaved on a variety of tasks in order to prepare for the coming round of

⁷⁷ Cornelia Andrews, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 29.

⁷⁸ Ida Adkins, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 9.

⁷⁹ Jacobs, “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself”, 758.

ploughing, sowing and harvesting. This included jobs such as clearing new land, removing ground logs from existing fields and cutting firewood. If the plantation lay along the coast or marshy bogland the enslaved also spent this time in clearing ditches and canals.⁸⁰ Ploughing of the land usually commenced in late February followed by planting and intensive weeding in early spring. If the plantation was engaged in the cultivation of multiple crops, such as corn and wheat, the corn was usually planted and then left to ripen during late June, when the harvest of the wheat began, planted in the previous winter.

By July 4, the corn was “laid by” and left to ripen without further interference, the wheat was stored, and many of the formerly enslaved recalled this day as a holiday, marking the end of the planting season, and coinciding with the celebrations enjoyed by the local white population marking Independence Day. Ransom Sidney Taylor remembered that on John Cane’s plantation in Wake County, holidays were given ‘at layby time, and the 4th of July.’⁸¹ Henry James Trentham also recalled this period known as ‘lay by time’ which occurred around the July 4, ‘...at lay-by time was another big time. Dat wus ‘bout de Fourth of July. Dey give a big dinner an’ everbody et all de barbecue an’ cake dey wanted.’⁸² Holidays such as July 4 were not only periods during which the enslaved could expect increased freedoms and mobility but were also a time during which they could socialise, and possibly pursue a courtship with a partner on a neighbouring plantation.

During the heat of summer most slave-owners removed themselves and their families from the plantations of the South to cooler climates, whilst their slaves busied themselves with assorted tasks such as cleaning ditches, building fences and threshing

⁸⁰ See Durrill, “Routine of Seasons”, 168.

⁸¹ Ransom Sidney Taylor, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 339.

⁸² Henry James Trentham, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 366.

wheat. During September the leaves would be stripped from the growing corn, which were then dried and fed to livestock in winter. In October the corn itself was harvested. Following the corn harvest the land would be ploughed before the winter frosts that would make the turning of the soil virtually impossible. Other members of the workforce would be engaged in the planting and harrowing of the following year's spring wheat.⁸³ Corn was usually shucked (the stripping of the leaves from the harvested corn husks) during December and masters might have thrown a corn shucking, to which neighbouring slaves would be invited. On Josiah Collin's plantation, Somerset Place, in Washington County, late autumn was also notable for the slaughter of the hogs. 'The entire adult slave population ordinarily occupied itself for about two weeks in slaughtering hogs and preparing the meat...In addition, a small group of women spent two or three days rendering hog fat so as to prepare it for soap making.'⁸⁴ Events such as corn shuckings and hog killings not only serviced the needs of the master, but as Chapter Five argues, represented work-based occasions that the enslaved were able to manipulate in order to meet their own needs and desires in terms of socialising and courtship.

Christmas time in particular was an important holiday for the enslaved community, as it was during this time that many of the established boundaries were relaxed, if only for a few days. Most slave-owners would throw some sort of celebration for their slaves during this period and it was at this time that the enslaved men and women would receive their clothing allowances for the year. Julius Nelson recalled that '...Dem was de happy times, 'specially on Christmas mornin' when we all goes ter de big house ter celebrate an' ter git our gif's. Dey give us clothes, food an' fruit. One Christmas we had a big tub of candy, I reckollects.'⁸⁵ Christmas time was depicted as a

⁸³ Durrill, "Routine of Seasons", 177-180.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 180.

⁸⁵ Julius Nelson, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 145.

specific and special time by the enslaved when the norms that governed their lives for the rest of the year were temporarily loosened.

Many recalled that they were given brandy or whiskey on Christmas morning, an alcoholic indulgence that the slave-owner did not usually condone for fear of an intoxicated and dangerous workforce. Parker Pool who was enslaved in Wake County mentioned this particular feature of the Christmas festivities, remarking that on Aufy Pool's plantation, '...We had brandy at Christmas.'⁸⁶ Similarly William Sykes, who was enslaved in Martin County recollected that '...Most o' de holidays was celebrated by eatin' candy, drinkin' wine an' brandy...'⁸⁷ Other formerly enslaved men and women talked of the traditional feasting and dances that the Christmas period signified. Charlie Barbour had been enslaved in Johnston County, and he remembered that the Christmas festivities lasted from Christmas day to New Year when, '...we had a dance what lasts all night. At midnight when de New Year comes in marster makes a speech an' we is happy dat he thanks us for our year's wuck an' says dat we is good, smart slaves.'⁸⁸ During the Christmas period, the social order was temporarily eased, the mobility and leisure time of the enslaved increased and their social freedoms were extended.

Licensed free time such as during Christmas, or after the crop had been laid by in July, were periods in which the enslaved could attend local frolics and socialise with other enslaved men and women. Alice Baugh's mother, who had been enslaved in Edgecombe County, told her that the Christmas holidays had lasted from the Saturday to the Monday. During this time the enslaved '...went up de riber to other plantations ter dances an' all dem things.'⁸⁹ In extending their social networks beyond the immediate

⁸⁶ Parker Pool, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 188.

⁸⁷ William Sykes, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 328.

⁸⁸ Charlie Barbour, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 74.

⁸⁹ Alice Baugh, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 83.

plantation during these periods the enslaved were presented with the opportunity to establish relationships outside of the context of work. These holiday periods provided the enslaved with the opportunities to move beyond the boundaries of the plantation. In this atmosphere they were able to socialise with neighbouring enslaved men and women and possibly establish a courting relationship.

The limited freedoms provided during the Christmas period were embraced by the enslaved. Such freedoms and the relaxation of the regulations governing their daily lives were illustrated by the enslaved at the annual John Kooner parade. John Kooner was a popular festival, undertaken by the African and Afro-Caribbean slaves in several parts of the West Indies, particularly in Jamaica, where the custom of parading continues until the present day.⁹⁰ However, on the North American mainland the only place where the tradition of John Kooner is known to have persisted amongst the enslaved was North Carolina. Given the make-up of the slave population in this state, and the fact that a majority of slaves imported into North Carolina came overland from Virginia and South Carolina, it is perhaps surprising that there are no known references to the John Kooner parade in the neighbouring towns of Charleston or Richmond. However, the fact that the majority of those slaves that were imported directly into North Carolina were from the West Indies, especially from the island of Jamaica, may help in part to resolve this matter.

The most detailed account of the parade was given by Doctor Edward Warren, who witnessed a John Kooner while visiting Josiah Collin's Somerset Plantation, which lay on the shores of Lake Scuppernong in Washington County. His description of the

⁹⁰ It has been argued that the Kooner parades originated in Africa, their namesake being John Conny, a tribal headman on the Guinea Coast around 1720. However, other historians have stressed the European influences in the parade such as the "actor boy" character. There is also a suggestion that the name John Kooner is a corruption of the term *gens inconnus* (unknown folks) signifying those hidden behind the John Kooner masks. For a further discussion of the John Kooner parades, their origins and meanings see Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica, 3 Volumes*, (London, Lowndes, 1774); Warren, "A Doctor's Experience in Three Continents"; Dougald Macmillan, "John Kuners", *Journal of American Folklore*, XXXIX (1926), 53-57; Robert Dirks, *The Black Saturnalia: Conflict and Its Ritual Expression on British West Indian Plantations*, (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1987); Durrill, "Routine of Seasons".

John Kooners was made during a visit to Somerset in 1829. He observed that the Kooners only appeared during Christian festivals, most notably on Christmas day. The leading figure was the rag-man, who was dressed in a costume of rags, adorned by two great ox-horns, attached to the skin of a racoon, which was drawn over his head and face. The rag-man was also decorated with bells and strings of goat horns ‘...so arranged as to jingle at every movement; and a short stick of seasoned wood, carried in his hands.’ Followed by the rag-man came the second leading character of the parade, who according to Dr Warren was ‘...the best looking darkey of the place, who wears no disguise, but is simply arrayed in what they call his Sunday-go-to-meeting suit and carries in his hand a small bowl or tin cup, while the other parts are appropriated by some half a dozen fellows, each arrayed fantastically in ribbons, rags, and feathers, and bearing between them several so-called musical instruments or “gumba boxes,” which consist of wooden frames covered over with tanned sheep skins.’⁹¹ The parade took the form of a dance, accompanied by a song directed at the master. At the end of the verse the second character approached the master with his bowl in hand to receive the expected quarter. The procession then moved on to finally come to rest in the slave quarters.

The John Kooner parades excited much amusement and wonder amongst the slave-owners and their families. Anne Cameron wrote to her husband Paul Cameron, from Fairintosh Plantation, Orange County, on 8 January 1848. She delighted in telling him of the Christmas they had enjoyed and remarked how ‘...Our little ones keep well and are as happy as the day is long.... They all had a merry Christmas finding their stockings full of St Nicholas’ gifts upon waking and having music and dancing together with a John O’Cooner...’⁹² In later years, Rebecca Cameron recalled the Christmases

⁹¹ Warren, “A Doctor’s Experience in Three Continents”, 201.

⁹² 8 January 1848, from Anne Cameron to Paul Cameron, Cameron Family Papers, 1757-1978, box 44, fol. 1024, 1-15 January 1848, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

she had spent at her Grandfather's rice plantation on the Cape Fear River. She wrote that 'On the second day after Christmas the John Coonahs began to make their appearance, Sometime in the course of the morning, an ebony herald, breathless with excitement, would project the announcement: De John Coonahs comin! And away flew every pair of feet within nursery precincts.'⁹³

Yet the procession lacked any real significance to the amused white children and adults who failed to understand the deeper meanings behind the parade. Elizabeth Fenn has argued that the John Kooners functioned on Christmas day in order to invert the traditional roles and positions that white and black occupied in the "normal" social hierarchy of the American South. She considers the celebrations in terms of a "cathartic, steam – valve function" helping to ease the social tensions that existed between the white and black populations of the slave-holding states. Fenn also suggested that whilst slave masters encouraged these events in the hope that they would contribute to the fostering of a more placid and docile slave population, the slave community manipulated such occasions, expressing their hopes and fears through ridicule and costume. She writes '...costumes...were mere emblems of the more profound role reversal that Jonkonnu could entail. Blacks saw in the festivities a chance not only to "dress" in white skin but also to claim white social prerogatives.'⁹⁴ These white social prerogatives might have included that of courtship and romance, which were an essential component of the Christmas festivities for the enslaved and which could progress much more easily in the social climate of the holiday period.

The social calendar of the enslaved in North Carolina was then mediated by the demands of the agricultural year. Holidays and social events were provided at specific points during the year and included that of New Year, July 4, an annual corn shucking in

⁹³ Rebecca Cameron, "Christmas on an Old Plantation", *Ladies Home Journal*, 9 (Dec 1891), No 1, 5-6, 5.

⁹⁴ Elizabeth A. Fenn, "A Perfect Equality Seemed to Reign: Slave Society and Jonkonnu", *North Carolina Historical Review*, LXV (1988), No 2, 127-153, 137.

late autumn, and Christmas holidays lasting from a few days to two weeks in late December. It is significant that these social occasions were spread across the year and thus provided the enslaved with several windows of opportunity in which to establish courting relationships. These events were crucial to the enslaved for maintaining contact with their community. Furthermore, these periods were licensed by the master and as such the enslaved were able to engage with friends and family freely and without fear of punishment from slave-owner or patrollers. As Chapter Five illustrates slave frolics and illicit movements off the plantation after dark also supplemented these authorised events in the social world of the enslaved.

4.7: Boxing and Dipping: Enslaved Life in the Turpentine Industry

Not all enslaved men and women were engaged in fieldwork or lived as part of a plantation or farming orientated workforce. This chapter has already discussed the primary importance of the turpentine and naval stores industry in North Carolina. This was especially so in the eastern counties, which were rich in the long leaf pine used in the production of such materials. The turpentine industry operated on a task system as opposed to the gang labour system used on the plantation. For the enslaved who worked in the turpentine industry, the year was divided into specific tasks that required immense skill and strength. From November until March slaves performed one of their most important tasks – that of boxing. A hole was cut at the base of the pine’s trunk in order to hold raw turpentine. The experienced labourer was expected to be able to cut from 75 to 80 boxes a day.⁹⁵ For example, Jonathan Worth, who owned a turpentine plantation in Wilmington, wrote to his son David Gaston Worth in 1853, after spending ten days on the turpentine plantation, he wrote ‘...I had from 16 to 20 hands and had made about 15

⁹⁵ Outland, “ Slave Work and the Geography of the North Carolina Naval Stores Industry”, 34-35.

thousand boxes...the black hands were making from 2000 to 25000 boxes per day. The prospect is pretty fair for getting 200,000 boxes.’⁹⁶

The process of boxing was followed from March onwards by the cornering of each box in order to guide the gum into the box. Once cornered the boxes had to be dipped four to seven times each season in order to collect the gum.⁹⁷ Labourers were expected to fill from four to seven barrels a day with raw turpentine.⁹⁸ Highly skilled and well-trained slaves were also sought for the task of chipping, as the pine tree would only bleed as long as its wounds were fresh. The job of chipping required particular accuracy, because if a gash was cut too deep a tree’s life was shortened. The master also required considerable speed in this task and demanded an average of 800 to 1,000 tree faces to be chipped each day.⁹⁹ During November and following the last chipping and dipping, the task of scraping began. The scrape consisted of the gum that had hardened to the face of the trunk and had thus lost much of its spirits in evaporation. The scraping continued from December to January. Thereafter highly skilled slaves began cutting new boxes immediately, if new pine forest were to be used in the next season, whilst others cleared grass, pine straw and tree limbs from the bases of trees and burned debris.

Aside from the constant and unrelenting labour demanded from the turpentine slave, life on the turpentine plantation was often isolated, detached and lonely. Whilst the task system afforded the enslaved a relative degree of autonomy the camps themselves were typically located far away from agricultural plantations and the processing of the turpentine itself. Generally located in the pine forest, the men enslaved

⁹⁶ 25 June 1853, from Jonathan Worth to David Gaston Worth, Worth Family Papers, 1844-1955, fol. 3, 1853-1856, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

⁹⁷ The process of dipping utilised an instrument known as a *dipper*, which had a spade shaped blade and a handle. Gum was collected from the box by thrusting the dipper into one end of the box, pushing it to the bottom and bringing it up the opposite side. The sticky gum was collected on the flat surface of the dipper. See Outland, “ Slave Work and the Geography of the North Carolina Naval Stores Industry”, 36.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 37.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 38.

in these camps had less contact with their families and, for the most part no female companionship. The turpentine industry was reliant on the physical strength of enslaved men for heavy tasks such as boxing, dipping, chipping and cornering and thus enslaved men dominated the turpentine labour force in North Carolina. Reflecting this gendered division of labour amongst the turpentine workers The *Southern Cultivator* wrote in 1846, ‘...the same boxes will stand tending or chipping from eight to ten years, which labour is performed by males, both white and slave, women and children not being very serviceable’¹⁰⁰

The turpentine industry created quite a different experience of enslavement than that experienced by those who inhabited the farms and plantations of North Carolina. It is possible that the social world of the enslaved turpentine labourer was particularly limited, especially when compared to the relatively greater number of holidays and social events that relieved the drudgery of those enslaved on plantations and farms. The turpentine worker appeared to be employed throughout the year in numerous tasks and was rarely afforded the opportunity to engage in leisure time or the holiday season. Their isolation in the pine forests also served to limit the degree of social contact they could maintain with other enslaved men and women. However, there is evidence that those based in the turpentine industry did seek to participate in certain events within the social calendar of the enslaved.

Following a move to Georgia from Greene County, North Carolina, Guilford, a slave belonging to the turpentine planter Ben Williams, died following his bid to attend a local frolic after a day’s work. Ben’s wife Sarah wrote to her parents explaining the tragedy, ‘...some of our turpentine hands will work all day and then walk eight or ten miles to dance all night. Well Guilford undertook to go got lost in the woods and wandered for nearly six days...he lingered about a week and then died. We did not know

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 43.

that he was missing until he had been out three days...'¹⁰¹ Guildford's desire to maintain contact with the wider enslaved community had resulted in tragic consequences. However, his actions indicate that despite the working conditions of slavery, enslaved men and women did seek to participate in certain social events and thus extend their relationships beyond the immediate world of the plantation or the turpentine camps. Moreover, Sarah William's comment that "*we did not know that he was missing until he had been out three days*" reflects the ease with which some enslaved men and women could slip away and return without their slave-owner noticing their absence.

The conditions and experiences of enslavement were extremely varied then, depending upon their geographical location, the size of the plantation or farm, the type of work that occupied the enslaved, the nature of their master and mistress and the amount of social freedoms and "off time" bestowed upon them by the slave-owner. Although North Carolina's diversified economy makes it impossible to generalise about the experiences of enslavement in the state it is possible to gain some insight into the ways in which particular work regimes impacted upon the conditions and social environments of certain enslaved men and women.

4.8: The Life Cycle of the Enslaved.

The formal work life of the enslaved did not typically begin until they reached a certain age. Several of the WPA respondents remarked that they were too young during slavery to do any heavy or "real" work. John Smith recalled that on his master's plantation in Wake County children were not made to work until they were at least twelve or fourteen, '...unless it was some light work around de house, mindin' de table, fannin' flies, an' pickin' up chips to start a fire, scratchin' marster's head so he could

¹⁰¹ 25 March 1859, from Sarah F. Hicks Williams to Mr. And Mrs. Samuel Hicks, Sarah F. Hicks Williams Letters, 1836-1868, fol. 6, 1856-1868, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

sleep in de evenings an' washin' missus feet at night 'fore she want to bed.'¹⁰² Such jobs seemed typical for young enslaved children on the plantation and none of the North Carolinian WPA narratives refer to any heavy labour being undertaken before the age of twelve.¹⁰³

Deborah Gray White's research has suggested that neither work nor play was segregated on the basis of sex in the life of the enslaved child.¹⁰⁴ It would seem from the WPA narratives at least that this was the case in North Carolina. Both men and women remembered performing similar tasks as children and even recalled sharing small household duties. Mary Anngady recalled that the job of herself and her brother during slavery was to scratch the feet of their mistress, Mrs Bettie Davis. She remarked that '...you know how old folks like to have their feet rubbed. My brother and I used to scrap over who should scratch and rub her feet.'¹⁰⁵

The lack of a strict gender division in the world of work persisted for enslaved children who entered the field once they were old enough. The work regimes on many plantations and farms often blurred the gender divisions between enslaved men and women, although as this chapter has already suggested, this was not so in industries such as turpentine. Some enslaved women worked at the same or similar jobs to that of enslaved men in the fields. For example Lucy Murphy's grandson, John Bectom, recalled that Lucy would, get up, and '...begin burning logs in new grounds before daybreak. They also made her plow, the same as any of the men on the plantation...'¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² John Smith, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 278.

¹⁰³ Cy Hart, of Durham, North Carolina recalled that on 'Marse Paul's plantation we had to be eight years ole before we 'gun to work.' Yet this work for Cy had included tending chickens and turkeys rather than heavy labour in the fields, see Cy Hart, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 380.

¹⁰⁴ White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 93.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Anngady, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 33.

¹⁰⁶ John C. Bectom, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 92-3.

Clara Jones, who was enslaved in Wake county, also considered the work she performed on Felton McGee's plantation as "man's work". She claimed that, '...I worked lak a man dar an' de hours wus from sunup till dark mostly.'¹⁰⁷ Essex Henry remembered that the work on Jake Mordecai's plantation was hard, declaring that '...I knows case I'se seed my little mammy dig ditches wid de best of 'em. I'se her split 350 rails a day many's de time.'¹⁰⁸ The very fact that these recollections refer to such work as *manly* is indicative that the labour regimes of the plantation often disrupted and offended the gendered norms that existed in the quarters of the enslaved.¹⁰⁹

The sexual division of labour was more pronounced in the work performed by the enslaved in the master's house or in skilled trades. Eustace Hodges and her mother had originally belonged to a man named McGee in Wake County. Whilst enslaved on the McGee plantation Eustace's mother was a field hand '...in de fiel's den, ditchin' an such, even plowin'...' However, McGee sold both Eustace and her mother to Rufus Jones. At Rufus Jones's plantation her mother was a house servant and Eustace explained, '...mammy ain't had ter ditch ner plow no mo'. She wurked in de house den, an' none of de wimmen done men's wurk.'¹¹⁰ Some skilled jobs, such as cook, nurse, midwife and seamstress were generally reserved for women on the plantation whilst men undertook roles such as driver, blacksmith, stonecutter and cooper.

The nature of skilled occupations for enslaved men meant they were able to hire themselves out, receiving wages and paying their master or mistress an amount each

¹⁰⁷ Clara Jones, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 31.

¹⁰⁸ Essex Henry, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 394.

¹⁰⁹ For a discussion of the sexual division of labour and the gendered nature of work amongst the enslaved see Jacqueline Jones, *Labour of Love, Labour of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present*, (New York, Basic Books, 1985); White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*; Liese Perrin, *Slave Women and Work in the American South*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1999).

¹¹⁰ Eustace Hodges, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 447.

month for the privilege of owning their own time. Through this practice enslaved men were able to obtain a higher degree of mobility than enslaved women, whose occupations typically grounded them within the borders of the plantation. Hannah Plummer's father was a stonecutter in Wake County. Although she and her mother belonged to a different owner, Hannah's father still lived with his wife and child courtesy of his occupation. Hannah explained that, '...he hired his time and gave it to his missus and lived with us.'¹¹¹ Anderson Henderson's master, John Henderson, allowed him to hire out his labour. Anderson was given the choice to be hired by the month or the year and so he explained to his master, '...I thought as it is more customary in Wilmington to be hire by the month than the year that I would go by the month at 12 dollars per month.' Anderson's awareness of the freedom that the terms of hiring bestowed upon him were further revealed when he wrote that he had decided to be paid monthly rather than yearly because, '...if I did not like one house I could go to another for this is a good many hotels here that I could get in if I did not like this.'¹¹²

Another element of life that tied enslaved women, rather than enslaved men, to the plantation was childbirth and parenting. Deborah Gray White has illustrated that the majority of enslaved runaways were between sixteen to thirty-five years old. During this period most enslaved women were either pregnant, nursing a child or had a small child to care for. Thus, White argued that enslaved women were less mobile than enslaved men, and ran away from the plantation less frequently because 'women tended to be more concerned with the welfare of their children, and this limited their mobility. Fugitive men loved their offspring, but unlike the runaway male, the slave woman who left her children behind could not be certain that they would be given the best possible

¹¹¹ Hannah Plummer, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 178.

¹¹² 26 January 1849, from Anderson Henderson to John Steele Henderson, John Steele Henderson Papers, 1846-1916, box 2. series 1.1, fol. 17, 1847-1849, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

care.’¹¹³ Gutman’s analysis of the Bennehan-Cameron plantation in Orange County revealed that the average age of enslaved women at the birth of their first child was 17.7 years.¹¹⁴ Little mention is made in the course of the WPA narratives regarding such matters, however, Hattie Rogers stated in her interview that her mother was fifteen years old when Hattie was born. Hattie’s father was a white man named Levin Eubanks and Hattie called him Master Levin.¹¹⁵

Following childbirth, many enslaved women lived with their children on a different plantation to that of their husband or lover, and were thus much more likely to remain on the plantation for the sake of their children. Jane Lassiter and her mother belonged to Dr. Kit Council and lived on a plantation on the lower edge of Chatham County. However, she explained, ‘...my father belonged to de Lamberts. Their plantation was near Pittsboro in Chatham County.’¹¹⁶ Cross-plantation unions were especially common in North Carolina and the image emerging from the WPA narratives serves to reinforce the idea advocated by Emily West that separation of the enslaved on a local level was manageable via such arrangements.¹¹⁷ The maintenance of such relationships required a degree of mobility on the part of the enslaved, and it was enslaved men in particular who made visits to their wife or loved one. As Chapters Five and Six will discuss these cross-plantation unions were one of the forces influencing enslaved men to take leave of the plantation at night after dark, facing the risk of punishment and the patrol gangs.

¹¹³ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 70-71.

¹¹⁴ Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 171.

¹¹⁵ Hattie Rogers, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 227.

¹¹⁶ Jane Lassiter, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 38.

¹¹⁷ West, “Surviving Separation”; West, “The Debate on the Strength of Slave Families”; West, “Masters and Marriages”.

Enslaved men and women were perhaps obliged to engage in cross-plantation unions in North Carolina because of the relatively small size of their slave-owner's holdings. This chapter has already discussed the fact that the majority of slave owners in North Carolina held only a small number of slaves and thus the opportunities for the enslaved to select a partner were severely limited. There was then an advantage as regards courtship for the enslaved on larger plantations, as they had a wider selection of partners from which to choose. Unequal sex ratios between enslaved men and women further compounded such problems. Men initially dominated amongst the enslaved in early colonial North Carolina, but there was a significant decrease in the sex ratio as the period progressed. From 1751-55 the sex ratio was about 153 enslaved men for every 100 enslaved women. From 1761-1775 this number decreased to around 125.¹¹⁸ This imbalance in the sex ratio of enslaved men and women was subject to regional variation, with the more densely settled areas of North Carolina experiencing much more favourable sex ratios. As this chapter has already established in industries such as turpentine, the sexual imbalance amongst the enslaved was heavily weighted towards men. Thus, for the enslaved who inhabited densely settled areas such as the Cape Fear region, where there were large plantations, the opportunities to meet and establish relationships with members of the opposite sex were greatly increased.

Life expectancy was also a factor that may have impacted on the courting experiences of the enslaved. As Chapter Five illustrates enslaved men and women were careful in instructing their children in particular morals and values, especially in the realm of courtship and personal relationships. This particular concern is also another example of those themes discussed in Chapter Three, which have already been established in the existing historiography concerning courtship and love amongst the southern white elite, and that may be used to consider the courting relationships of the enslaved. In order to understand the significance of such influences it is necessary to

¹¹⁸ Cary and Kay, *Slavery in North Carolina*, 161.

establish the average age to which enslaved men and women lived. If this factor is considered it is possible to determine whether young enslaved couples had parents who were alive and possibly, if they lived with or near enough to their children, operated as an influence upon the relationships they formed.

It is difficult to assess life expectancy for the enslaved in antebellum North Carolina. Using evidence from the plantation lists of white slave-owners, slaves ranged in age from birth to sixty-five years old. In a list of fifty-nine slaves from the Davidson plantation, the average age of the slaves listed was 24.8 years. However, the list included four slaves who were fifty years old, Dick and Malinda who were sixty years old and a slave named Peter, who had been marked as “old” at sixty-five years of age.¹¹⁹ Slave-owners obviously preferred to maintain a workforce that was relatively young. This was in order to ensure that his plantation was stocked with fit and healthy men and women who could reproduce and labour efficiently.¹²⁰ A plentiful supply of young slave women of childbearing age also heightened the possibility that the slave-owner could add to their existing slave population through natural reproduction. The Cronly family papers revealed a picture of their slave population that typified such an arrangement. Out of fifty-two slaves listed during 1865 the average age was 20.5 years. The oldest slave was Harriet who was aged ‘about’ sixty-five years old. She was also listed as the nurse. After Harriet, Louis the gardener was listed as aged fifty and Leslie, his wife and the cook was forty-five years old.¹²¹ Aside from these three slaves the rest of Cronly’s slave

¹¹⁹ Davidson Family Papers, 1748-1887, box 2, fol. 12, 1842-1887, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library*, Duke University.

¹²⁰ Josiah Collin’s plantation, Somerset Place, near the Albemarle Sound in north-eastern North Carolina provides an example of this. In 1829 there were no male slaves over the age of 42 and only four female slaves aged 42 to 51 years old. The majority of slaves were aged between 12 years old and 21 years old. For further discussion see Durrill, “Slavery, Kinship, and Dominance”, 3-8.

¹²¹ Cronly Family Papers, 1806-1944, box 1, fol. 1, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library*, Duke University.

population consisted of relatively young men and women aged between fourteen and thirty years old.¹²²

However, as the list from the Davidson plantation illustrates, several enslaved men and women on the plantation fell outside of these age brackets and in fact probably exceeded expectations of the slave-owner regarding the life expectancy of their slaves. As Chapter Five demonstrates several men and women, whose parents had been enslaved recalled the influence that they had exerted on their relationships. This aspect of the courting experience is more difficult to assess for the enslaved themselves. However, we may suggest that if, as Gutman has claimed, the average age at which an enslaved woman in North Carolina had her first child was 17.7 years, and enslaved women typically lived to at least thirty years of age, it is possible that parents, or at least the mother, would still be alive and living in close proximity when their children were old enough to enter into a courting relationship. It is thus feasible to suggest that parental influence may have been a significant factor in the courtship experiences of the enslaved.

In terms of life expectancy and the age of the enslaved it is also interesting to note that the older enslaved men and women on the Cronly plantation had acquired positions that conferred a degree of status on them, such as cook, nurse or gardener. John Blassingame has argued that age gradation represented one of the keys to social status within the enslaved community, and older enslaved men and women were accorded respect from the younger members of the enslaved community.¹²³ This status may have been enhanced through the age of the enslaved who occupied the position of cook or butler. It may not have been their actual occupation that provided such esteem amongst their fellows but their age and life experiences.¹²⁴

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ See John Blassingame, "Status and Social Structure in the Slave Community: Evidence from New Sources", in Harry P. Owens, [ed.], *Perspectives and Irony in American Slavery*, (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1976), 149.

Moreover, Blassingame also claimed that the domestic or skilled slave was not regarded as being in the upper echelons of the enslaved communities hierarchy. Instead, Blassingame suggests that it was those who were able to service the needs of the enslaved community through their position – such as the cook who made extra provisions or the seamstress who procured extra cloth – who commanded a degree of respect in the quarters of the enslaved.¹²⁵ Several of the WPA respondents recalled the highly accomplished nature of some of the jobs undertaken by enslaved men and women on the plantation. Tempie Herndon Durham recollected that on the plantation in Chatham County, there was a big weaving room where the blankets and cloth for the winter clothes were woven. She recalled that her mother, Rachel, worked in the dyeing room and declared with a degree of pride that ‘...Dey wuzn’ nothin’ she didn’ know ‘bout dyein’. She knew every kind of root, bark, leaf an’ berry dat made red, blue, green or whatever color she wanted.’¹²⁶ It was probable that the enslaved made use of Rachel’s skills in the dyeing room and this accounted for Tempie’s admiration.

4.9: Regulating the Enslaved in North Carolina

Slave Codes

The majority of enslaved men and women in colonial North Carolina inhabited a less densely settled environment than that of their South Carolinian and Virginian counterparts. Consequently, North Carolinians did not develop intricate slave control legislation until the mid eighteenth century. North Carolina enacted its first slave code in 1715, following the legal establishment of slavery in the colony. The code was based upon statutes passed in neighbouring southern colonies that served to regulate the freedoms of the enslaved. The initial code served to control relations between black and white sectors of the population both slave and free. It also helped to further differentiate

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 140-142.

¹²⁶ Tempie Herndon Durham, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 286.

and define the legal status of servants and slaves. Fearful of rebellion and slave insurrection following the 1739 Stono Rebellion in South Carolina, North Carolinian legislators tightened their rulings and by 1741 had constructed a far more complex and restrictive slave code than its original of 1715. 'Like other colonies, North Carolina through these statutes and juridical and social definitions and practices, effectively limited enslavement to nonwhites and defined slaves as chattels, with almost no legal protections of their persons, whose permanent status passed from mother to child.'¹²⁷

Through these codes, enslavement was clearly confined to specific groups within the colony, namely those of African descent and Native Americans. The codes included regulations concerning the detainment of runaway slaves and the mobility of the enslaved. Those who harboured runaway slaves for more than one night were subject to fines at the rate of ten shillings per day for each runaway, plus whatever costs and damages occurred. This payment was to be made to the slave-owner. Any slave found off the plantation was expected to have obtained a pass from their owner, detailing the name of their master or mistress, the origin of their trip and their destination.¹²⁸ They were required to produce this pass at the request of any white person. The codes increasingly reflected the slave-owner's fear of an organised slave rebellion and this was revealed in the restrictions imposed on the slave's mobility and movement. Specific punishments were meted out to 'any Negro or Negroes [who] shall presume to travel in the Night, or be found in the Quarters or Kitchens among other Persons' Negroes.'¹²⁹

Slave codes also outlawed the meeting and socialising of the enslaved, again because of white fears of planned slave insurrections. This was especially so in the urban centres of towns such as Wilmington, where a high proportion of the population were enslaved. In 1765, a Wilmington edict instructed that if any more than three slaves were

¹²⁷ Cary and Kay, *Slavery in North Carolina*, 61.

¹²⁸ Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*, (Cambridge, Mass, London, Harvard University Press, 2001), 34-35.

¹²⁹ Cary and Kay, *Slavery in North Carolina*, 63.

seen together ‘...on the streets, alleys, Vacant lots, House or other parts within this Borrough, playing, Riotting or Caballing on...Sunday, or any other day, or in the night time of any Day, whereby the Inhabitants or any of them may be disturbed or molested (*sic*), the slave or slaves...’ were to be taken to the mayor, recorder or alderman and committed or whipped, or both. The act also imposed a ten o’ clock curfew. Slaves had to acquire a pass from their master if they wished to be out beyond this hour.¹³⁰ A further act of 1794 made it unlawful for a person to permit the slaves of others to dance and drink on their premises without the written permission of their owners.¹³¹ As Chapters Five and Six illustrate these slave codes restricted the movement and mobility of the enslaved and thus had profound consequences for the possibilities of courtship and social relationships off the plantation.

The enslaved were also denied the right to civil marriage in all the colonies that sanctioned slavery, and later the southern slave-holding states, as slave marriages were not recognisable by law. In the eyes of the law, marriage was a civil contract and slaves, as property, could not engage in any form of contract or agreement. Margaret Burnham has argued that the real reason legal marriage was denied to slaves was one of expediency, ‘...the sexual exclusivity and permanence implicit in marriage were inconsistent with the master’s right to sexually control and to alienate...’¹³² The slave had no civil existence in southern legal definitions. In terms of the law the slaves’ identity was wholly dependent on their master’s or mistress’s ownership, they in turn were entitled to own nothing. Following the end of the slave trade in 1807, slave-owners began to encourage their slaves to enter into *de-facto* marriages, as they sought the

¹³⁰ Donald R. Lennon and Ida Brooks Kellam, [eds.], “The Wilmington Town Book, 1743-1778, (Raleigh, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, 1973), 168, cited in Cary and Kay, *Slavery in North Carolina*, 69.

¹³¹ Extract of Act of Assembly concerning Slaves, www.docsouth.unc.edu/nc/rowan/rowan.html, March, 2003.

¹³² Burnham, “An Impossible Marriage”, 208.

natural reproduction of their slave population, anchored by the sense of stability and security that the idea of family provided for the slave. However, slave marriages meant nothing in legal terms and husband and wife could be separated and sold away from each other as their master or mistress desired.

Slave codes reflected the fears of southern white society who were outnumbered by the slave population and fearful of mass insurrection and rebellion. Laws governing the mobility of the enslaved were however difficult to enforce, and as Chapters Five and Six illustrates the enslaved found many ways in which to leave the plantation at night without permission and pursue relationships beyond the physical boundaries of the plantation. However, as I shall discuss below, patrol gangs of local white men were established throughout the slaveholding states in order to police the movements and activities of the enslaved. Chapter Six will discuss the significance of the patrol gangs in the courting experiences of the enslaved and the means by which enslaved men and women resisted such control. It is then helpful to understand something of the workings of the patrol system as it operated in North Carolina.

Patrol Gangs

Patrol gangs were established as an integral part of the law enforcement system that developed in early eighteenth century North Carolina. The regulation of its population's mobility had long been a preoccupation of the colonial state's legislature. The colony's scattered settlements made it an ideal haven for those running from obligations elsewhere and thus, in early colonial North Carolina a system of passes and badges was used to regulate the movement of servants, Native Americans and the poorer white members of the community, as well as its steadily growing slave population. Indeed, even those persons wishing to leave North Carolina had to have a written pass

from the colony's secretary to certify that they were debt free and leaving behind no obligations.¹³³

However, by the mid eighteenth century conditions in North Carolina had changed, as the increasing number of slaves in the colony emerged as the defined "threat" that required careful observation and control. The means of regulating and controlling the movement of slaves was enshrined in the slave code of 1715 and the first formal groups representing slave patrol gangs were established in North Carolina by 1753.¹³⁴ Groups of "searchers" were organised, who were entitled to enter slave quarters and look for weapons and signs of planned insurrection. Men who served as "searchers" qualified for certain exemptions such as militia and jury duty as well as from provincial, county and parish taxes.¹³⁵ "Searchers" were preoccupied with the fundamental fear that governed southern white society concerning planned slave rebellions and the incessant desire to reveal and destroy such plots. Alongside the "searchers", slave patrol gangs were established in certain areas of colonial North Carolina. These patrol gangs were organised in counties such as Chowan and New Hanover, where there was a high concentration of the slave population.¹³⁶ Patrol gangs were much more concerned with the movement of slaves and the capture of runaways than with revealing planned insurrections. By the Revolutionary War of 1776, patrol gangs had begun to displace "searchers" as law enforcement groups became fundamental in regulating the movement of slaves and maintaining the system of slavery across the American South.

Slave patrols continued with the "searcher's" original duties of seeking out weapons and plans for slave rebellions. However, they were also concerned with preventing slave gatherings of any kind, and the safeguarding of areas around

¹³³ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 33.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* 35.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 36.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

plantations and towns, by keeping errant slaves from leaving the plantations without permission. The patrol gangs were not expected to be on duty every night of the week. It was assumed that there was less reason to patrol their area on week-nights, as it was believed that slaves, weary from their daily toil, were less likely to escape off the plantation in order to attend a gathering or go courting. For example, in Rowan County the patrol regulations of 1825 stated that 'It shall be their duty, or two of their number, at least to patrol their respective districts once in every week; in failure thereof, they shall be subject to the penalties prescribed by law.'¹³⁷ However, unannounced night rides during the week ensured that the threat of the patroller was always present in the minds of the slave population. During the weekends, holidays and harvest season, and during periods of conflict and war, the patrol gangs were particularly active as the mobility of the local slave population was greatly increased and thus the perceived threat of slave rebellion was heightened.

Rather than being created out of the existing militia units, as in South Carolina and Virginia, the slave patrol gangs in North Carolina were appointed by the county courts, perhaps reflecting the view that patrolling was primarily a civil duty, not a military task. Service in the patrols was obligatory for all white men who appeared on the tax or militia list, and were thus listed as property owners in North Carolina.¹³⁸ Patrol service qualified men for certain exemptions from duties such as performing militia services and the payment of taxes. In the Act of Assembly of 1794, concerning the duties and privileges of patrols, patrollers were exempt from serving on juries, working on roads, and from the payment of all parish and County taxes to the amount of forty shillings.¹³⁹ Sally Hadden has suggested that there were also other benefits to white men

¹³⁷ Patrol regulations for the county of Rowan; printed by order of the county court at August term, anno domini 1825, www.docsouth.unc.edu/nc/rowan/rowan.html, March, 2003.

¹³⁸ This did not however include free blacks, despite their payment of taxes. See Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 73.

¹³⁹ Extracts from the Act of Assembly concerning the duties and privileges of patrols, Act 1794. chapter four, www.docsouth.unc.edu/nc/rowan/rowan.html, March, 2003.

who served as a patroller. She claimed that the patrol gangs were not only a means for the white community to maintain and regulate the system of slavery but also allowed white men to cultivate a sense of camaraderie and brotherhood with each other.¹⁴⁰ As Chapter Six illustrates the presence of the patrol gangs also created bonds between enslaved men, who were forced to face and challenge a common enemy in the shape of the patroller. The formation of the patrol gang thus strengthened bonds not only between members of the southern white community but also unintentionally between those who were enslaved on the plantations of the South.

Court justices made use of militia muster lists and local tax rolls to determine who would serve as patrollers, choosing men between the ages of sixteen and sixty, thus, ‘...property ownership was a prerequisite to patrolling, at least in North Carolina.’¹⁴¹ The idea that the patrol gangs were made up of men who owned property contravenes popular images of the patrollers advocated by historians and folklorists such as Eugene Genovese and Gladys Marie Fry. Both have suggested that patrols were typically made up of “poor white folks” who exercised and abused their limited rights to power over the enslaved through membership of the patrol gangs.¹⁴²

In fact, as Hadden has argued, patrol activities could not be left to poor whites alone. Men from the lower classes of white southern society had little vested interest in preserving the system of slavery and also may have been on friendly terms with members of the slave community, often forming relations through trading or socialising together.¹⁴³ Slave patrols continued to monitor the world of poor whites, especially at specific localities, where interaction with the slave population might have occurred, such

¹⁴⁰ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, Chapter Three, “Patrol Personnel: They Jes’ Like Policemen only Worser”.

¹⁴¹ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 72.

¹⁴² See Fry, *Night Riders in Black Folk History*, Chapter Three “The Patrol System”; Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1976), 22,

¹⁴³ For discussion of these issues in the case of Georgia see Lockley, *Lines in the Sand*, 42.

as the tavern or the market place. Hadden argued that in ‘...North Carolina, patrolling continued to be the work of men from all classes well into the nineteenth century, and non-slaveholders remained in the minority of patrol groups.’¹⁴⁴

Whilst slave-owners often served in the patrols or at least sat on the patrol committees, which appointed, supervised, and dismissed patrols as well as hearing any complaints brought against the patrol gangs, their attitudes towards the patrollers were ambiguous. Although controlling the movements of the slave population was fundamental to maintaining the system of slavery and protecting white society from the threat of slave rebellion, many slave-owners resented the infringement of their own authority over the enslaved by the local white men serving on the patrol gang. Patrol regulations sanctioned corporal punishment as in the Act of Assembly of 1794 which stated that ‘...the patrollers in each district, or a majority of those present, shall have power to inflict a punishment not exceeding fifteen lashes, on all slaves they may find off their owner’s plantation, or travelling on the Sabbath, or other unreasonable time, without a proper permit or pass.’¹⁴⁵ Such use of power was unacceptable to the slave-owner who, as Hadden noted, lived in a world where, ‘...Southern honour required the individual to protect his name and family without the assistance of courts or the community; patrols, by their very nature, were communal, intrusive in the master-slave relationship, and implied that the individual alone could not adequately control his bondsman...’¹⁴⁶ Complaints heard by the patrol committees were usually brought by disgruntled slave-owners who took exception to the patrol gang’s interference with the plantation justice system.

The regulation of enslaved life in North Carolina was part of a wider entrenched system of control that evolved across the American South throughout the course of the

¹⁴⁴ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 99.

¹⁴⁵ Extracts from the Act of Assembly concerning the duties and privileges of patrols, Act 1794, Chap. 4, www.docsouth.unc.edu/nc/rowan/rowan.html, March, 2003.

¹⁴⁶ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 70.

eighteenth century. Experiences of enslavement in North Carolina differed yet all enslaved men and women were subject to the patrol regulations of each county and the slave codes of the state. As Chapter Six will discuss such legislation created specific and restrictive controls over the lives of the enslaved, particularly in the arena of courtship, which they in turn might have rejected through various means of implicit and explicit resistance.

This chapter has focussed upon the development of slavery and the experiences of enslavement in North Carolina. Chapter Five will now reflect on how the enslaved managed their courting relationships and mediated the demands of the labour system in order to do so. As this chapter has argued it is necessary to understand the nature of the labour regimes undertaken by the enslaved in order to consider the ways in which they could appropriate time and space to create a courtship. Chapter Five expands upon these considerations and also reflects on the competing parameters of time for the enslaved, which this chapter has already begun to discuss in terms of work regimes on the plantation. Courtship activities of the enslaved were also subject to definitions of plantation time, including that of licensed leisure time. Chapter Five also explores how the enslaved were able to negotiate the regulations governing their lives and consequently establish a social world removed from the physical and mental boundaries of the plantation in which they were able to partly define their own courtship experiences.

Chapter Five

Enslaved Courtship in North Carolina

5.1: Enslaved Courtship: An Archetype

An enslaved man and woman, William, a field hand and Sarah, a house servant, met at a corn shucking held on the plantation of Sarah's master. William's musical abilities had previously attracted her attention at a local slave frolic where he had played the fiddle. In order to catch his attention at the corn shucking, Sarah had exchanged some of her garden produce with her mistress in return for some material to make a new dress for the event. The couple established a courtship and took the opportunity to see each other whenever the chance arose. On Saturday evenings, William would usually obtain a pass from his master, which enabled him to walk the two-mile journey to her plantation. Once he arrived, she would prepare the possum he had caught, and they would eat and spend the night in each other's company. Occasionally, the couple would meet at a secret frolic held in the quarters of the enslaved, or in a clearing in the thick forests that surrounded the plantations. At the frolics the couple sang and danced together, accompanied by music of the banjo or William and his fiddle. On one such occasion, the patrol gang interrupted the frolic and whipped those who were found to be without a pass. Neither William or Sarah had gained their owners' consent to attend the frolic and therefore were unable to produce the necessary pass, thus they both received a whipping from the patrollers. The couple also continued to meet at work-based events organised by their slave-owners such as candy pullings and corn shuckings. It was at one of these candy pullings, a year after they had first begun to court, that William decided to propose. He had already gained permission from both their masters to marry. Sarah immediately declared her feelings for him and on the following Sunday the couple were married on the porch of her master's house. Sarah wore an old white dress that once belonged to her mistress, with a bright red ribbon tied in her hair. William wore a flower in the buttonhole of the suit his master had given him for the occasion. Although the suit

was a tight fit, it was agreed by their guests, who included members of the local enslaved community, that they made a handsome couple. The local black preacher performed the ceremony and then Sarah's master asked that they jump the broomstick in order to symbolise their union. Following the short ceremony the fiddler began a tune and Sarah took the first dance with her master. A special dinner was presented, which included smoked ham and bacon, as well as candy for the children. Eventually Sarah and William retired to her cabin but William was forced to leave before daybreak to return to his own plantation, before work began in the fields.¹

5.2: All In a Day's Work – The Context of Courtship for the Enslaved

The illustration above, based upon a number of narratives from the WPA collection, represents what an archetypal courtship might have looked like for an enslaved couple. This chapter will explore how the enslaved established and maintained courting relationships within the system of slavery. As Chapter Four has established the working lives of the enslaved were subject to a formal and informal system of rules and regulations that defined the system of slavery in the American South. Courtship for the enslaved was often an infrequent or intermittent affair, occurring when the chance arose, dependent on the will and consent of the slave-owner, and often as part of the underside of work-based events. The enslaved appropriated time that was technically "owned" and "authorised" by the slave-owner in order to establish or pursue a courtship. Alternative claims to "time" and "space" within which such relationships could be established were also created by the enslaved as they fashioned a social world that was removed from the physical and psychological confines of their life as "slaves".

¹ This composite courtship was drawn from the following narratives in the WPA collection Alice Baugh, vol. 14, pt. 1, 83-86; John. C. Bectom, vol. 14, pt. 1, 92-98; W. L. Bost, vol. 14, pt. 1, 139-146; Laura Bell, vol. 14, pt. 1, 100-102; Tempie Herndon Durham, vol. 14, pt. 1, 285-290; Richard C. Moring, vol. 15, pt. 2, 139-142; Julius Nelson, vol. 15, pt. 2, 144-6; Lilly Perry, vol. 15, pt. 2, 163-166; Tanner Spikes, vol. 15, pt. 2, 310-311; Penny Williams, vol. 15, pt. 2, 402-05; Anna Wright, vol. 15, pt. 2, 421-424.

Whilst the white planter elite established their relationships in a variety of different settings, meeting their beau or belle at parties, local events or Sunday church meetings, the enslaved had far fewer opportunities for meeting and courting. Emily West's research has highlighted the fundamental importance of cross-plantation unions for the enslaved in South Carolina.² In North Carolina such relationships also predominated. As Chapter Four has already illustrated the pattern of slave-holding in North Carolina was characterised by smaller plantations and farms. Consequently, the enslaved lived and worked together in relatively small groups and their immediate social world may have been quite limited. This resulted in many enslaved men and women looking off the plantation when seeking to establish a courtship.

Some of the WPA respondents referred to the fact that their family were separated across different plantations. In particular, men often lived apart from their wife or girlfriend, and their children. It was a common social arrangement for the enslaved in North Carolina to establish relationships across plantations. For example, Isaac Johnson and his mother Tilla belonged to Jack Johnson who owned a plantation near the Cape Fear River. However Isaac remarked that his father, Bunch Matthews, did not belong to Jack Johnson and was in fact the slave of '...old man Drew Matthews, a slave owner.'³ Isaac's narrative does not reveal whether Bunch lived near enough to himself and Tilla to be able to visit them, yet several of the narratives indicate that this form of familial arrangement was common across North Carolina. Tempie Herndon, who was enslaved in Chatham County, married Exter Durham during slavery, who she explained, '...belonged to Marse Snipes Durham who had de plantation 'cross de county line in Orange County.'⁴ Because they did not belong to the same slave-owner or live on the

² West, "Surviving Separation"; West, "The Debate on the Strength of Slave Families".

³ Isaac Johnson, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 15.

⁴ Tempie Herndon Durham, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 286.

same plantation, Tempie explained that after their wedding Exter, ‘...lef’ de nex’ day for his plantation, but he come back every Saturday night an’ stay ‘twell Sunday night.’⁵ Exter and Tempie thus maintained contact through Exter’s visits across the plantations at the weekends when the enslaved were usually given a certain amount of free time to spend as they wished.

Opportunities to establish and maintain relationships across plantations, which may have resulted in a courtship and familial ties, were often presented at social events facilitated and authorised by the slave-owner. Gatherings would occur for the enslaved community in the form of work. Yet an important element of these work-based events were the opportunities that they provided for the enslaved to meet and socialise with neighbouring enslaved men and women. The economic needs of the slave system and the master were serviced by an enslaved community that were able to adapt the context of work to fit their own demands and needs.

Corn shuckings were a work-based event that usually occurred at least once a year, during the late autumn, and to which slave-owners often invited a large number of the neighbouring enslaved community. This invitation was a reciprocal agreement between the masters of the respective slaves. By inviting a large number of slaves from local plantations to join in the shucking the master ensured that the maximum quantity of corn could be husked in the least amount of time. However, these events were also a significant element in the social world of the enslaved and courtship was often a fundamental ingredient in the evening’s proceedings.

In a letter to her grandchildren written from North Carolina, Mrs R. A. Marshall described the corn shuckings on her son’s plantation, which involved much more than simply the husking of the corn harvest:

When the overseer has a quantity of corn to husk, he allows his negroes to invite those on the neighbouring plantations to come and help them in the

⁵ *Ibid.* 288.

evening When all things are ready they light their torches of pitch and march while singing one of their corn songs to the spot. Their captain mounts the heap of corn and all sing a call song for the others to come which is immediately answered from the other plantations in a song that they are coming...then they appoint Captains to succeed each other from the different companies – who mount the heap in turn and play their monkey pranks...⁶

The key element of Mrs Marshall's account, at least for the purpose of this research, is the element of consent on the part of the master, which resulted in his slaves being *allowed* to invite the neighbouring slaves to help them in the harvesting of the corn. The corn shucking provided the context for the creation of social networks that extended beyond the immediate social world of the plantation, with the full consent of the respective slave-owners. This was one environment in which the enslaved were able to establish romantic relationships or proceed with a courtship that might have been formed at a previous gathering.

Corn shuckings and other such events were not wholly understood as work-based events amongst the enslaved. The emphasis for them was the element of socialising attached to the occasion, which included eating, drinking and spending valuable time in each other's company after the work required from them had been completed. Mrs Marshall mentioned at the end of her account that she left the slaves at about twelve 'o' clock to enjoy their supper, which had been prepared for them by the overseer.⁷ Unfortunately her account ends here and we are left to imagine what might have occurred after the master and mistress departed for the night. In another account of the

⁶ 19 April 1852, from R. A. Marshall to John and Charles Marshall, Marshall Family Papers, 1852, section A, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*. (emphasis in original).

⁷ *Ibid.*

corn shucking events that occurred on southern plantations an observer noted how the slaves spent the ‘moonlight nights around the blazing fires in singing, carousing and making merry.’⁸ Whilst we should not forget that these events were predicated around work, it is important to note how work time was adapted into something of much more significance to the lives of the enslaved.

Within the WPA narratives formerly enslaved men and women recalled events such as corn shuckings with the emphasis on their social element rather than the work involved. Henry Rountree described such events as the ‘grandes time ever. We has two er three corn shuckings ever fall, we has wood splittin’ days an’ invite de neighbors in de winter time. De wimmen has quiltin’s an’ dat night we has a dance.’⁹ These approved social events emphasised the paternalistic image of the slave-owner to the local white community and fellow slave-owners, whilst also serving to regulate the leisure time of the enslaved. Slave-owners were aware of the significance of such occasions to their slave community and it is no coincidence that these events were often arranged after a period of heavy or intense labour on the part of the enslaved. The slave-owner presented such occasions as rewards to his slave population, aiming to diffuse social tensions and maintain his own authority.

One such reward contained in these organised social events were the opportunities they provided to meet members of the opposite sex, and thus initiate a courtship. Julius Nelson remembered the shuckings at his master’s plantation in Anson County where young men and women would engage in courtship games, ‘...marster let us have one long co’n shuckin’ eber’ year an’ de person what fin’s a red year (ear) can kiss who dey

⁸ 31 January 1836, John F. Heath, “On the Conditions of Slaves in the Southern States and the Expediency of Emancipation”, William Morris Papers, 1807-1922, Nixonton, North Carolina, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

⁹ Henry Rountree, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 233.

pleases.’¹⁰ Tanner Spikes, who was enslaved in Wake County, also recalled this game of kissing for a red ear of corn, ‘...I ‘members a corn shuckin’ what happened ‘fore de war wus over, an’ what a time dem niggers did have. Dey kisses when dey fin’ a red year an’ atter dat dey pops some popcorn an dey dances ter de music od de banjo...’¹¹

These occasions not only allowed for the enslaved to establish courtships but also provided the opportunity for couples who were already in a relationship to spend time together. Anna Wright, who was interviewed for the WPA narratives, recalled the stories told to her by her mother about candy pullings, where molasses were boiled and then “pulled” or stretched by two people at either end in order to create the correct consistency to make candy. Anna remembered that her mother’s memories focussed around the courting that occurred at such events, ‘ De candy pullin’s wus a big affair wid de niggers. Dey’d come from all over de neighborhood ter cook de lasses an’ pull de candy. *While de candy cooked dey’d play drappin’ de handkerchief an’ a heap of other games. De courtin’ couples liked dese games ‘case dey could get out or play an’ court all dey pleased.*’¹² Such examples illustrate the fact that out of the conditions of the southern slave system and the labour regimes and living arrangements that it imposed on the enslaved, work and courting were at times inextricable from each other within the life of the enslaved.

The element of “consent” was fundamental to those social occasions which formed part of the licensed periods of leisure bestowed on the enslaved by the slave-owner. This concept of consent was central to the courtship experiences of the enslaved, not only in terms of the context in which they might have been established, but also in maintaining and furthering these relationships. As Anna Wright’s comments above make

¹⁰ Julius Nelson, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 146.

¹¹ Tanner Spikes, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 310.

¹² Anna Wright, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 422. (emphasis added).

clear, authorised social events such as candy pullings provided established enslaved couples with the opportunity to spend time together. Anna further recollected that it was at such social events that many enslaved couples decided to make their union more significant. She remarked that at the candy pullings the courting couples ‘...often made up dere min’s ter ax de marster iffen dey could marry too.’¹³ Enslaved men had to first gain the permission of the woman’s master and usually his own before they could make a proposal of marriage. These organised social gatherings provided enslaved men with an opportunity to take this action.

Several of the WPA narratives referred to the casual way in which a slave union *could* be established. For example Parker Pool, from Wake County, recalled that when a man loved a woman on another plantation ‘dey asked der master, sometimes de master would ax de other master *if dey all agreed all de slave man an’ ‘oman had ter de Sa’dy night wuz fer him to come over an’ dey would go to bed together.*’¹⁴ The interesting feature of Parker Pool’s comments was that although the actual union of an enslaved man and woman was symbolised in a rather informal manner, the couple were still required to gain the consent of both their masters before their relationship could be legitimised. Other respondents in the WPA narratives stressed the more formal routes of consent and approval that the enslaved were required to gain from their master. Laura Bell recalled that her father, Wesley, was compelled to ask their master, Mack Strickland, before he was able to establish a formal relationship with her mother, Minerva Jane. Laura explained that ‘...i’se hearn her tell ‘bout how he axed Marse Mack iffen he could cou’t mammy an’ atter Marse Mack sez he can he axes her ter marry him.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Parker Pool, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 188. (emphasis added).

She tells him dat she will an' he had 'em married by de preacher de nex' time he comes through dat country.'¹⁵

Enslaved couples usually sought the approval of their master or mistress for their relationship, even when they both resided on the same plantation, as was the case with Wesley and Minerva Jane. When such consent was not forthcoming, enslaved men and women might have been forced to conduct their affair in secret. Valley Perry's grandparents, Josephine and Jake, belonged to two different masters in Wake County, Nat Whittaker and Master Middleton respectively. Their courtship took place in secret, Valley explained, because, 'When gran'father Jake fell in love wid gran'mammy nobody ain't knowed hit, 'case dere marsters am mad at each other an' dey knows dat dere won't be no marryin' twixt de families.' Josephine and Jake courted each other under the cover of darkness until Jake's master followed him one night and caught him in Josephine's cabin. He whipped Jake and then turned on Josephine, only to be stopped by Nat Whittaker who also brought Jake from Middleton on the same night. 'De nex' day he thinks ter ax gran' mammy what Jake am a'doin' in her cabin, an' gran' mammy tells him dat she loves him. Marse Nat laugh fit ter kill an' he sez dat dey'll have a big weddin' at de house fer dem.'¹⁶

Josephine and Jake's courtship illustrates one of the possibilities that were open to enslaved men and women in cases where their master rejected their choice of partner. In conducting their courtship in secret they were acknowledging their awareness of the need for consent from their respective masters, yet they recognised that had they tried to obtain such approval, their relationship would be over. When their affair was finally exposed they risked punishment and the prospect of separation. Neither Jake nor Josephine could have guaranteed that Nat Whittaker would have been willing to buy

¹⁵ Laura Bell, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 101.

¹⁶ Valley Perry, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 171.

Jake, and thus salvage their relationship. In the process of falling in love, this couple had consciously taken risks and constantly endangered their relationship in continuing to court. The giving or the withholding of the owners' consent was thus essential to the form that a courtship might take between enslaved couples.

Familial consent might also be considered as an important factor shaping the courting relationships of the enslaved. The nature of the WPA narratives makes it difficult to assess the extent of influence that relatives, especially that of parents, had on the relationships of the enslaved. When discussing their own or their relatives experiences of enslavement the dominant authority figure that emerged in the narratives was the slave-owner. As I shall discuss at greater length later in this chapter the majority of respondents in the WPA narratives related their own experiences of courtship in the post-emancipation period, when parental influence does emerge as a prevalent theme. This is not to suggest that parental influence was not a prominent issue in the choices made by enslaved courting couples but that the sources serving as the basis of this research reveal little about such dynamics.¹⁷

5.3: Fun and Frolics

Simply because licensed social events such as candy pullings and corn shuckings were governed and authorised by the slave-owner does not mean that the enslaved did not derive any personal or emotional fulfilment from them. James Walvin has argued that slave-owners encouraged the process of rational recreation amongst their slaves as a means to integrate them further into the systems of labour operating on the

¹⁷ Deborah Gray White argues that on southern plantations enslaved women often schooled their daughters on avoiding the sexual overtures of both black and white men. White suggests that mothers seemed to want girls to grow up slowly, and so they attempted to limit her contact with members of the opposite sex. Despite these attempts, Gray concludes that enslaved teenage girls had a degree of sexual freedom unknown to southern white girls. See White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 96-97.

plantations of the South.¹⁸ Walvin defined rational recreation as periods of leisure time where the enslaved were engaged in endeavours that were useful, yet pleasurable.¹⁹ Rational recreation could include activities such as the cultivation of a garden plot, as discussed in Chapter Four, which served as an important tool in the eyes of the slave-owner for socialising the enslaved in the values of industry and hard work. The enslaved also engaged in a form of rational recreation at corn shuckings and candy pullings, which met the labour demands of the plantation, yet contained an element of recreational activity. Walvin further suggested that ‘...slaves like workers elsewhere, might subvert the system and convert it to their ends and impose on it a style which was all their own.’²⁰ As the previous chapter has argued the enslaved made use of the garden plots given to them by the slave-owner in order to acquire a degree of quasi-independent economic status. Thus, it is possible to see how this ideal of rational recreation was subverted and converted by the enslaved in order to meet their own interests.

In the WPA narratives, discussion of work-based events such as corn shuckings were defined as distinct from that of “work” and ideas of rational recreation. Instead the enslaved frequently linked them to ideas of “fun”. This is suggestive of the fact that the enslaved derived some personal satisfaction from these work-based affairs and in fact defined them as different or separate from other elements of the work regimes on the plantation. The enslaved thus imbued this sanctioned or authorised leisure time with alternative meaning and significance. They embraced the opportunities provided at such events to further their own social relationships and participate in activities and games relating to courtship, such as kissing for a red ear of corn.

Henry James Trentham discussed these authorised social events with a degree of enthusiasm and excitement, ‘De corn shuckin’s wus a great time. Marster gave good

¹⁸ James Walvin, “Slaves, Free Time and the Question of Leisure”, *Slavery and Abolition*, 16 (April, 1995), 1-13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

licker to everybody den...We had big suppers den an' a good time at corn shuckin's.'²¹

These periods of licensed leisure seemed to have formed part of an informal social contract governing the relationship between the enslaved and the slave owner. These events were perceived as a necessary release from the perspective of the slave-owner, who envisaged a well-behaved and obedient workforce through the promise of future such occasions. Yet, whilst these occasions functioned as part of the slave system and in many ways helped to maintain it, the enslaved came to expect such rewards from their master and mistress and indulged in such opportunities when the chance arose. These occasions of licensed leisure were vital to the enslaved in the process of courtship and served to ease the pressures exacted on such relationships by allowing the enslaved the freedom to spend time together.

The distinction between “work” based and “fun” orientated events is reflected in the comments of those who felt deprived of periods of licensed leisure. Clara Jones recalled that on Mr Felton McGee’s place in Wake County where she had been enslaved, ‘...we ain’t had no fun dar, case hit takes all of our strength ter do our daily task...’²²

Cornelia Andrews, also used this concept of fun to describe her days on Doctor McKay Vaden’s plantation, ‘We ain’t had much fun, nothin’ but candy pullin’s ‘bout onct a year.’²³ It would seem then that these periods of authorised social activities came to be expected by the enslaved as part of the social obligations of a “good” master and mistress. Not every slave-owner was willing to concede such time to their slave population, and it was telling that for the enslaved who were not provided with such opportunities they characterised their life as lacking “fun”.

²¹ Henry James Trentham, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 365.

²² Clara Jones, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 31. (emphasis added).

²³ Cornelia Andrews, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 28, (emphasis added).

One significant element of the “fun” enjoyed at events such as corn shuckings was the presence of the fiddler. Recollections in the WPA narratives mentioned the fiddler as one of the central figures at these social gatherings. For example Julius Nelson remarked that ‘...Bout twice a year we had a sociable when de niggers from de neighborin’ plantations ‘ud be invited an dey’d come wid deir *banjos an’ fiddles an’ we’d dance, all o’ us, an’ have a swell time.*’²⁴ Bill Crump, who was enslaved in Davidson County, remarked with a mixture of pride and excitement, on his father’s role at the local frolics, ‘My daddy was a fiddler, an’ he sometimes played for de dances at de Cross Roads, a little village near de marster’s place...yes ma’m, we had our fun at de dances, co’n chuckins, candy pullin’s, an de gatherin’s an’ *we sarbed de marster better by habin’ our fun.*’²⁵ The slave-owner’s purpose in allowing his slaves to attend these social gatherings, listen to the fiddler and dance to the music was not lost on enslaved men such as Bill. He understood that these occasions were controlled and regulated by the slave-owner, and in allowing his slaves to attend these events, the master would expect a more obedient and pliable workforce. Yet, the overriding emphasis in Bill’s narrative was the experience of “fun” for the enslaved on such occasions, enhanced by the presence of the fiddler, and the freedom to socialise with other enslaved men and women.

The North Carolina narratives unfortunately contain few references to the types of dancing that may have occurred during these licensed periods of leisure or when the enslaved attended illicit social gatherings away from the observations of the slave-owner. Leon Berry recalled that there was usually a caller present at organised frolics. The caller’s role at such events was to choreograph the movement of the dancers and coordinate their steps. Leon explained how one dance might have proceeded: ‘ Go round and round and turn back to your left, turn to your right, two ladies cross over this

²⁴ Julius Nelson, interviewed for the WPA narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 146. (emphasis added.)

²⁵ Bill Crump, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 209. (emphasis added).

way and the chaps do the same...Join hands, move right, say move back left, he said catch that one with the left hand and turn right aroun' and catch the one' or catch two on the right – They were dancin' then.'²⁶ Hannah Crasson, a respondent in the North Carolina narratives, also made reference to the type of dancing her aunt performed at frolics and slave gatherings. She explained that, '...she wuz a royal slave. She could dance all over de place wid a tumbler of water on her head, widout spilling it.'²⁷ Other such examples from the North Carolina narratives are rare and it is difficult for the historian to evaluate the role of dancing at events where enslaved courtship occurred in this particular state.

However, narratives from other slave states do make reference to the significance of dancing for the enslaved at more informal frolics and social gatherings where bodily expression might have been used to attract the attention of a certain somebody. For example, in Louisiana an enslaved man named Sam was danced off the floor by Miss Lively, whom Sam had attempted to impress through his dancing, '...His movements tested the strength of every muscle and ligament in his body, as his legs flew like drumsticks down the outside and up the middle, by the side of his bewitching partner.'²⁸ The dance floor could represent the place where the enslaved could attract somebody's attention, compete with each other for such attention, or simply demonstrate their physical and rhythmical abilities. Stephanie Camp cited the example of two enslaved women in Virginia who participated in a dance competition with each other. The challenge was made substantially greater as each woman was expected to dance with a glass of water on her head, as Hannah Crasson's aunt was famed for doing, the

²⁶ Interview with Leon Berry, Long Creek, North Carolina, Glenn Hinson Collection, 1980, *Southern Folklore Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

²⁷ Hannah Crasson, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 191. This particular practice of carrying vessels or goods on one's head, especially for women, may well have derived from their African heritage and thus possibly serves as an example of cultural retention amongst the enslaved.

²⁸ Solomon Northup, "Twelve Years a Slave", cited in White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 144-5.

winner being the woman who maintained her composure and made the performance of the dance look easy.²⁹ These examples from other slave states therefore indicate the significance of dancing at the social gatherings of the enslaved, particularly as a means to attract the attention of a particular person or compete with a love rival for somebody's affections

5.4: The Temporal and Spatial Geography of Enslaved Courtship

As Chapter Four has already illustrated, for those enslaved on plantations and farms, a distinct social calendar of authorised events emerged reflecting the respective peaks and troughs in the agricultural year. Licensed social occasions such as corn shuckings tended to occur within the confines of the plantation, usually under the authority and gaze of the slave-owner or the overseer. Even when the enslaved were given permission to be off the plantation, during the Christmas period or at the weekends, their movements were still subject to plantation regulation. Slave-owners specified the 'spatial and temporal boundaries of a pass's tenure by writing the bondperson's destination and the pass's expiration date.'³⁰ Yet the enslaved also left the plantation without permission, to attend local frolics and illicit social gatherings where they might pursue a courtship. In attending such events, the enslaved removed themselves from the plantation and thus transcended the boundaries of time and space that were imposed upon them. The geography of enslaved courtship can thus be divided into separate social spheres; one in which the master was wholly compliant and encouraged as the underside to work-based events or sanctioned holidays; and that which the enslaved attended without the master's permission and thus must be understood as an autonomous social space claimed by the enslaved themselves.

²⁹ See Camp, "Pleasures of Resistance", 557.

³⁰ Camp, "Pleasures of Resistance", 545.

Stephanie Camp has argued that at the heart of the process of enslavement was a geographical impulse to locate the enslaved in plantation space.³¹ The discussion of the slave codes of North Carolina in Chapter Four has made clear that slave mobility was the primary target of legislative measures and regulations of the plantation. Accordingly, Camp argued that, ‘...Slaveholders strove to create controlled and controlling landscapes that would determine the uses to which enslaved people put their bodies.’³² Certainly, it is clear from a consideration of events such as corn shuckings that slave-owners sought a degree of control over the leisure time of their slave population. It is also apparent that courtship was often embedded in the working practices and labour regimes imposed on the enslaved. This control was further emphasised through the physical boundaries erected on the plantation, including rail fences and hedges. Ironically the work routines of the enslaved often involved the creation and maintenance of this defined and limited geographical space.

Louisa Adams recalled the physical boundaries of the plantation on which she was enslaved in Richmond County, North Carolina. She remembered that ‘...All de plantation was fenced in, dat is all de fields wid rails; de rails wuz ten feet long...’³³ Similarly Parker Pool recollected that ‘Dere wuz about 2000 acres in de plantation. All de farm lan’ wuz fenced in wid wood rails.’³⁴ The enslaved were incorporated into creating and maintaining these physical features of the plantation. For example Parker Pool referred to the tasks undertaken by the slaves in order to maintain the land, ‘...We dug ditches to drain de lan’, blin’ ditches; we dug em’ an’ den put poles on top, an’

³¹ *Ibid.* 534.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Louisa Adams, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 4.

³⁴ Parker Pool, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 186.

covered ‘em wid brush an’ dirt.’³⁵ Essex Henry recollected that his mother was expected to split 350 fence rails a day while enslaved men on the plantation had a quota of 500.³⁶

It was within the confines of this defined plantation space at candy pullings, corn shuckings, and other such events that sanctioned courtship activities occurred for the enslaved. Whilst the enslaved did manipulate the terms of such events to their own ends, they also developed a distinct and separate sphere of courtship that transcended the physical confines that regulated their lives. Stealing themselves away from the plantation at night in order to attend a social gathering or engage in a particular courtship represented a means by which the enslaved established an alternative or “rival” geography. Stephanie Camp has suggested that this “rival geography” was characterised by motion and represented the ‘...secret movement of bodies, objects and information within and around plantation space.’³⁷ Whilst they were willing to appropriate the time given by the slave-owner during corn shuckings, and other work-based events, in order to pursue courtships, the enslaved also sought to define a separate and semi-autonomous sphere in which such activities could occur.

These illegitimate social gatherings were not always physically removed from the space of the plantation. They could for example occur in the slave quarters themselves or in secret in one of the outhouses or barns of the plantations.³⁸ Ann Parker who was enslaved in Wake County remembered that she used to evade the patrollers ‘...an’ go ter de neighborin’ plantations whar we’d sing an’ talk an’ maybe dance.’³⁹ Similarly, Fannie Moore, who was enslaved in South Carolina, recalled such an

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Essex Henry, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 394.

³⁷ Camp, “Pleasures of Resistance”, 535.

³⁸ For a further discussion of the ways in which the enslaved appropriated spaces on the plantation as their own see John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, (Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 12-18.

³⁹ Ann Parker, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 156.

occasion. 'I remember one time dey was a dance at one ob de houses in de quarters. All de niggers was laughin' an' a pattin' dey feet an' a singin...'⁴⁰ Yet, in staging these events within the quarters of the enslaved, such frolics represented something quite distinct from that of the work-based social events presided over by the master. By holding social gatherings and parties in areas designated as their own living space the enslaved attempted to create some psychological distance between their world and that of their masters and mistresses.

Other social gatherings were organised away from the confines of the home plantation and enslaved men and women recalled stealing themselves off in order to attend. Leon Berry recalled that his father, Hugh Berry, who was enslaved in Long Creek, North Carolina, would frequently leave the plantation, negotiating the local terrain in order to socialise with the neighbouring enslaved communities. 'Every two or three nights, we'd go out, four or five of us, would get together and go out. We'd get out and the first thing you know is here comes the patterollers...some of 'em they couldn't catch cos they'd go through a thicket he couldn't ride through there on his horse...'⁴¹

As Chapter Six will show, courtship represented a site where the slave-owner and the enslaved competed for and contested claims of power and authority over the ownership of the enslaved person's body and time. Embedded in the courting practices of the enslaved were acts of resistance such as Hugh Berry's, which included evading the patrol gangs and defying plantation regulations.⁴² Here however, I am seeking to underline that the enslaved created alternative social spaces for gatherings and parties to occur, at which courtship was a prevalent activity. Hugh Berry mentioned that the primary reason motivating himself and his associates to leave the plantation at night to attend these social gatherings was in order to pursue a courtship. '...I'm going back over

⁴⁰ Fannie Moore, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 132.

⁴¹ Interview with Leon Berry, Long Creek, North Carolina, Glenn Hinson Collection, 1980, *Southern Folklore Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

there to see that gal. And then they said and you gonna go too, said they goin' over there to see the gals and the first thing they know say, here come the patterollers!'⁴³

The geography of enslaved courtship can be located then in two competing spaces. Authorised free time, such as the Christmas holidays or work-based events represented one such arena. These events were governed by the slave-owner and represented an approved or licensed release of pleasure for the enslaved. This is not to say that the enslaved did not attach their own meanings and significance to such events. Indeed, it is probable that the freedoms provided at such occasions were exploited by the enslaved as invaluable opportunities to legitimately establish or pursue a courtship. In contrast to these authorised social gatherings or periods of freedom were the secret frolics and parties, organised by the enslaved, and held in their own quarters or somewhere off the plantation. These occasions represented a desire by the enslaved for a degree of autonomous space away from the slave-owner in which they could pursue their own personal relationships.

5.5: Redefining and Reclaiming the Courtship Experience

Opportunities for the enslaved to engage in courting behaviour existed as part of the slave-owner's sense of rational recreation for their slaves, as well as within the leisure activities, undertaken in the autonomous temporal and social space established by the enslaved themselves. The relationships that developed across these spaces were the product of complicated and competing definitions regarding the sexual identity of the enslaved, and the rights of ownership over the emotional lives of the enslaved. As Chapter Two has already shown, white images of enslaved relationships were replete with ideas of sexual licentiousness and promiscuity. In fact, for the enslaved the choice of a partner was a complex process, in which they went to great lengths in order to make themselves desirable to members of the opposite sex. Courting relationships were not

⁴³ *Ibid.*

mere casual arrangements amongst the majority of the enslaved and were often the result of a great deal of care and attention over their personal appearance.

Slave-owners worked strenuously to inscribe their authority on the body of the slave, most particularly through acts such as branding enslaved men and women with the initials of the slave-owner and regulating the clothing of the enslaved.⁴⁴ The enslaved were provided with an annual clothing allowance, usually during the Christmas period. This allowance typically consisted of standardised trousers and shirt for male slaves and dresses made from cheap calico fabric for females.⁴⁵ The slave-owner considered the clothing needs of the slave only in terms of work and thus there was little need for slave clothing to be made from fine coloured fabrics or into attractive attire. Sarah Hicks Williams, writing from a plantation in North Carolina, to her parents in New York, provided an account of the clothing made for her slaves each December and the lack of significance she thought her slaves held for their personal appearance, ‘At present there is sewing a plenty on hand for the servants. At this season the women have each a thick dress, chemise, shoes and a blanket given them. The men pantaloons and jacket, shirt, blanket and shoes besides bonnet and caps...as a whole they are naturally filthy and it is discouraging to make for them, for it is soon in dirt and rags.’⁴⁶

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the significance of the links between clothing, identity and race in the Americas see Rebecca Earle, “Two Pairs of Pink Satin Shoes!! Race, Clothing and Identity in the Americas (17th-19th Centuries), *History Workshop Journal*, 52, (2001), 175-195. Kirsten Fischer also suggests that in colonial North Carolina the practice of keeping one’s slaves in minimal clothing encouraged slave-owners to believe that African Americans as a group had inherently different physical needs and sensibilities than even white servants, who through the law were able to demand a certain level of comfort and warmth from the clothing their master provided. The near nakedness of some slaves furthered the idea of the innate differences between “black” and “white” in the colonial world. ‘Believing that slaves were unfazed by their exposure to whites and to each other, white observers saw slaves’ near nakedness as a sign of their unrefined sensibilities, their proximity to “nature” and hence distance from white “culture”, (163). See Fischer, *Suspect Relations*, 161-164.

⁴⁵ See Debra Parker and Patricia Campbell Warner, “ Slave Clothing and Textiles in North Carolina, 1775-1835”, in Barbara M. Starke, Lillian O. Holloman, Barbara K. Nordquist, [eds.], *African American Dress and Adornment: A Cultural Perspective*, (Iowa, Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co. 1990).

⁴⁶ 10 December 1853, from Sarah F. Hicks Williams, Greene County to Mr and Mrs Samuel Hicks, new Hartford, Sarah F. Hicks Williams Letters, 1836-1868, fol. 4, 1853, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

It was not that the slave-owner failed to understand the significance of clothing for the enslaved. They were fully aware of the need to control the attire of their enslaved labour force. Through such regulation the slave-owner inscribed their rights of ownership on the physical body of the slave population and attempted to prevent the slave from expressing any individuality through their personal appearance. The slave-owner was able to use clothing as a means of reward and punishment. Lizzie Baker claimed in her WPA interview that her mother Teeny McLintire, who was enslaved in Duplin County, could not go to any dances during slavery because she was crippled. Lizzie claimed that this was the result of a punishment meted out to Teeny by her mistress. Lizzie explained that ‘...a colored woman stole something when she was hungry. She put it off on mother and missus made mother wear trousers for a year to punish her.’⁴⁷ Teeny’s mistress punished her by forcing her to wear male clothing, thus undermining her femininity. In doing so, Teeny’s mistress established her authority over her slave property indicating the boundaries that separated white and black women in the antebellum South. Her action also underlined the ways in which the slave’s body and physical representation was used as a site of contestation and power.⁴⁸

Yet the enslaved did manage to reclaim a sense of autonomy over the clothing they wore. This was expressly so in the context of “Sunday” or “best” clothing, which

⁴⁷Lizzie Baker, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 67-8.

⁴⁸ I am not entirely sure that Lizzie Baker was referring to an item of male clothing in her use of the term “trousers”. Because she implied that the punishment crippled her mother she could have been referring to a form of shackles or manacles that were commonly known as “trousers”. However, Lizzie may have also meant that her mother could not attend local dances because she was “crippled” in a social sense as a result of being forced to dress in male attire. There is evidence from other plantations in the Americas that slave-owners would dress enslaved women in men’s clothing as a particular form of punishment. A Barbadian planter wrote in a letter during the 1830s that ‘...in the case of one woman on my estate who had a more than ordinary fondness for pugilistic exercises, I made her put on a suit of her brother’s clothes, that the habits might seem more becoming the sex. It had a good effect.’ See Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados*, (London, Zed Books, 1989), 40-41. This example supports the idea that Lizzie was referring to clothing in her narrative and also underlines the fact that clothing was an integral part of the power dynamics shaping slave societies, most especially in relation to the negation of the gender identity of the enslaved by the white slave-owning elite.

were obtained by the enslaved through extra labour they performed during their off time. Graham and Shane White make the point that the major division in the enslaved dress code in the antebellum American South was not between different classes of the enslaved but ‘...between what individual slaves wore Monday through Saturday and what they wore on Sundays.’⁴⁹ Sunday signified the day on which the majority of the enslaved were given a partial break from working. Hence, many of the enslaved were dressed in their best clothing on this particular day. Yet, the term “Sunday clothing” seemed to encompass all those clothes that were distinct from the standard plantation dress issued by the slave-owner, not just those reserved for Sundays in particular. “Sunday clothing” was worn during periods of social recreation and leisure by the enslaved and in social environments where they were most likely to socialise with members of the opposite sex. Henrietta McCullers recalled that on Sundays she and the other enslaved men and women on the plantation would follow her mistress’s coach to church, ‘On Sundays you should o’ seen us *in our Sunday bes*’ goin’ to church...’⁵⁰. Yet, enslaved men and women also recalled wearing their Sunday clothes at other special times too. Alice Baugh’s mother recollected that during the Christmas holidays the enslaved were allowed a week’s holiday and she added ‘...dey had dere Sunday clothes, which wuz nice...’⁵¹

As Chapter Four has already discussed, many slave-owners provided the enslaved with garden patches, which allowed for them to develop an informal economy and sustain a semi-autonomous status from their master. Historians such as Betty Wood have argued that members of the enslaved community would make practical use of their leisure time in order to engage in the sale or exchange of the produce that they had

⁴⁹ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture From Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*, (Ithaca, London, Cornell University Press, 1998), 27.

⁵⁰ Henrietta McCullers, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 74. (emphasis added).

⁵¹ Alice Baugh, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 84.

grown on their own garden patches.⁵² The opportunity to exchange and sell this surplus produce provided the enslaved with the means to procure non-essential goods, such as extra clothing or the material to create a special dress or smart suit for a particular occasion. In a collection of essays regarding the condition of slaves and slavery, Reverend Francis Hawley, who had spent fourteen years in the Carolinas, noted that he had never known an instance when the slaveholder put himself to any extra expense to provide his slaves with decent clothes. Yet, he remarked ‘If, by making baskets, brooms, mats, &c at night or on Sundays the slaves can get money enough to buy a Sunday suit, very well.’⁵³ The informal economy of the enslaved operated as a means for the enslaved to create a physical presentation of themselves that might have been regarded as sexually appealing to members of the opposite sex.

Slave-owners encouraged their slaves to participate in the informal economy and also maintained a degree of control over the way it was managed through purchasing their slaves’ produce themselves. Chana Littlejohn, who was enslaved in Warren County, recalled that her master, Peter Mitchell, would purchase goods from his slave men, ‘Marster brought charcoal from de men which dey burnt at night an’ on de holidays. Dey worked an’ made de stuff, an’ marster would let dem have de steercarts an’ wagons to carry deir corn an’ charcoal to sell it in town.’⁵⁴ Similarly, Hannah Crasson recalled that her mother and father worked their garden patches by moonlight, selling what they made, ‘...Marster brought it and paid for it...’⁵⁵

⁵² Betty Wood, *Women’s Work, Men’s Work: The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

⁵³ Reverend Francis Hawley, pastor of Baptist Church, Colebrook, Litchfield County, Connecticut, cited in Theodore Weld, “American Slavery as it Is: A Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses”, (New York, American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*, 95.

⁵⁴ Chana Littlejohn, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 56.

⁵⁵ Hannah Crasson, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 188.

The possession of a garden patch or the means to produce surplus goods with which to trade also allowed the enslaved to purchase luxury goods, which might have helped their case in a courting relationship. John Brickell suggested in his *History of North Carolina* that an informal economy had operated amongst the enslaved from the colonial period of North Carolina's history. According to Brickell, this informal economy amongst the enslaved was intimately linked to processes of enslaved courtship and the means to woo a particular woman. He wrote that enslaved men were provided 'with a sufficient quantity of Tobacco for their own use, a part of which they may sell, and likewise on Sundays, they gather Snake-root...with this and the Tobacco they buy Hats and other Necessaries for themselves, as Linen, Bracelets, Ribbons and several other Toys for their Wives and Mistresses.'⁵⁶ Thus from a very early stage in the colony's history of slavery, these garden plots and the informal economy facilitated and helped to maintain courting relationships between enslaved men and women.

Few of the WPA narratives mention the exchange of gifts between courting couples. But several of the respondents do discuss the ways in which men in particular would make practical use of their leisure time in order to provide material benefits for their family. This often included hunting or fishing in order to supplement the standard rations of the plantation.⁵⁷ Louisa Adams recalled that her mother and father had their own garden patches and hogs, which the family lived off. Her father also supplemented his family's diet by hunting. She explained that 'My old daddy partly raised his chilluns on game. He caught rabbits, coons an' possums. He would work all day and hunt at night.'⁵⁸ Ransom Sidney Taylor referred to hunting rabbits and possums during the

⁵⁶ Brickell, *The Natural History of North Carolina*, 275. (emphasis added).

⁵⁷ For a consideration of the role of hunting in the lives of the enslaved see Nicolas W. Proctor, *Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South*, (Charlottesville, London, University of Virginia Press, 2002), Chapter Seven, "Slave Perceptions of the Hunt".

⁵⁸ Louisa Adams, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 2-3.

holidays and in the evenings on John Cane's plantation. He explained that, '...We caught rabbits, hunting in the day time, and possums, hunting at night. We hunted on holidays...' ⁵⁹

By supplementing the rations of the plantation, in providing extra food for his loved ones, the enslaved man was able to assert an alternative masculine identity denied to him in his status as "slave". Nicolas Proctor has argued that hunting was an index of masculinity at a relatively early age for enslaved males. Moreover, this activity took on much more significance as the enslaved entered adolescence and began to establish more personal and intimate relationships. Proctor wrote that 'By sharing the game they killed, slave hunters assumed the patriarchal mantle of provider.' ⁶⁰ Proctor further noted that by adopting the role of provider in the context of the family, enslaved men were able to assert a sense of masculinity that mirrored that of their owners, '...By assuming the role of provider...slave hunters challenged their owner's authority and refuted the often emasculating influence of slave society.' ⁶¹ Chapter Six will further explore this theme regarding ways in which enslaved men were able to assume particular masculine roles in the context of courtship and the significance of such behaviour in terms of the gendered identity of the enslaved. Courtship represented a significant social space for the enslaved, within which they were able to embrace and act out alternative definitions of masculine and feminine behaviour that were predicated around white evaluations of appropriate gendered identity.

Larry Hudson argued that when establishing an intimate relationship the enslaved considered their practical needs far above that of any romantic ideals. He suggested that 'To these slaves finding a partner to complement their practical needs would have seemed far more important than being totally and sometimes recklessly

⁵⁹ Ransom Sidney Taylor, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 339.

⁶⁰ Proctor, *Bathed in Blood*, 157.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 157-8.

guided by romantic impulses...'⁶² However, by understanding the practical aspects of enslaved life, such as hunting and the working of garden plots, in the context of the autonomy and independence that such pursuits provided, it is possible to suggest that these functional activities complemented the creation of courtships and guided the romantic impulses of the enslaved. Through the working of a garden plot, the enslaved were able to participate in an informal economy that would allow them, for instance, to furnish their often sparse and inadequate provision of clothing. This may have been an important factor in attracting the attentions of a member of the opposite sex. Similarly, hunting for surplus food not only met a physical need for the enslaved, but also allowed for enslaved men to communicate their feelings, through presenting their catch in the form of a gift to a loved one. Hudson's separation of the need for practicality in the choices made by the enslaved and romantic impulses presents a far too simplistic picture and fails to consider the questions of love and romance that might have motivated the enslaved to engage in practical pursuits.

5.6: 'When he starts ter kiss me I tells him dat der's many a slip twixt de cup an' de lip...'⁶³: The Moral Structure of Enslaved Courtship

The influence of family and friends might have also been a fundamental factor defining the shape of an enslaved couple's courting relationship. As this chapter has already noted, the slave-owner assumed the dominant figure in the recollections of enslaved courtship from the WPA narratives collected in North Carolina. However, several of those interviewed did refer to the influence of their parents, who had previously been enslaved, on their own relationships in the post-emancipation period.

Laura Bell, the daughter of Wesley and Minerva Jane, discussed earlier in this chapter, recalled in her narrative how the lessons that her parents had learnt whilst

⁶² Hudson, *To Have and to Hold*, 158.

⁶³ Laura Bell, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 101.

courting were passed down to Laura and her suitor. Following emancipation Laura met Thomas Bell. However because she was only twelve years old, ‘...My folks said dat I wus too young fer ter keep company so I had to see him ‘roun’ an’ about for seberal years, I think till I was fifteen.’⁶⁴ It is reasonable to assume that Wesley and Minerva Jane’s influence was a response to their own experiences during enslavement. They prevented Laura from engaging in any form of intimate relationship until she was of an age that they considered appropriate, Laura’s sexual honour was thus protected by her parents, who may have struggled to achieve such ends during their own youth, owing to the conditions of enslavement. We can suggest that formerly enslaved men and women attempted to shape and define the courting relationships of their children in the post-emancipation period, based on their own experiences during enslavement. Children of the enslaved seemed to acknowledge and accept the morals that their parents imparted to them, as evidenced by Laura Bell’s reaction to Thomas’ advances. Following his proposal of marriage Laura accepted but she refused to allow Thomas to kiss her, explaining that, ‘...he has ter wait till we gits married.’⁶⁵

Although many enslaved couples despised the power that the slave-owner had over the fate of their relationship, some formerly enslaved men and women sought to exert a degree of influence over the courtships of their children in the post-emancipation era. Laura had been instructed by Minerva Jane and Wesley not to court Thomas Bell until they considered her to be of a suitable courting age. Lucy Ann Dunn’s mother, Rachel, who had been enslaved in Wake County, was the dominant authority figure in Lucy Ann’s romance with Jim, which occurred in the immediate aftermath of emancipation. After three Sundays of meeting at the church in Neuse, Jim finally asked if he could walk Lucy Ann home. She recalled,

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

...We walked dat mile home in front of my mammy an' I was so happy dat I ain't thought hit a half a mile home. We et cornbread an' turnips for dinner an' hit was night 'fore he went home. Mammy wouldn't let me walk wid him ter de gate. I knowed so I jist sot dar on de porch an' sez good night.⁶⁶

Lucy Ann's mother appeared as the controlling influence upon their relationship from the moment that Jim and Lucy Ann began courting. They were made to walk home in front of her, so she might keep a watchful eye on the young couple. Lucy Ann, aware of her mother's authority, would not even walk Jim to the gate when he left, but remained on the porch to say goodnight.

Following a courtship that lasted a year, Jim proposed to Lucy Ann. Rachel's advice to her daughter on the matter reflected the value that a formerly enslaved woman attached to marriage. Rachel had been the cook on the plantation belonging to Peterson Dunn of Neuse in Wake County before emancipation. She had a husband named Dempsey, who was also enslaved, and she had bore him five children, all born into bondage. Following Jim's proposal, Rachel reminded Lucy Ann '...how serious gittin' married is an' dat hit lasts a powerful long time...'⁶⁷. For Rachel to have imparted this advice to Lucy Ann illustrates the fundamental significance that courtship and marriage occupied in the lives of the enslaved. Contrary to the assertions of historians such as Frazier, discussed in Chapter Two, the enslaved emerged into the emancipation period with well-grounded ideas about the importance of institutions such as marriage, laying stress on the permanence and strength of these relationships.

Laura Bell also concluded her narrative by commenting on the enduring stability of relationships established during slavery or in the immediate post-emancipation era.

⁶⁶ Lucy Ann Dunn, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 281.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 282.

Looking back to her parent's relationship and forward to her life without Thomas, who had died several years before, she reflected that 'Love ain't what hit uster be by a long shot...'Cause dar ain't many folks what loves all de time.'⁶⁸ The suggestion that her parent's and her own marriage were characterised by a lasting sense of love and commitment further reinforces the argument that the enslaved established relationships on the basis of affection, intimacy, mutual attraction and personal consent. These representations of enslaved relationships contradict the negative assessments made by academics such as Frazier during the 1930s, regarding the inability of the enslaved to create meaningful or lasting relationships. The fact that the WPA narratives were being collected during the same period in which Frazier made such claims suggests that the black community offered an alternative interpretation and evaluation of enslaved relationships.

5.7: The Climax of Courtship – Weddings and the Enslaved

The WPA narratives indicate that many of the enslaved confirmed the strength and permanence of their relationship through a marriage ceremony. As Chapter Four has noted, enslaved marriage was not recognised by a southern legal system that defined slaves as property. However, enslaved couples were usually allowed to symbolise their union through a wedding ceremony, perhaps hoping to authenticate their relationship in the eyes of the slave-owner and thus prevent future separation through sale. Graham and Shane White have argued that their reading of the WPA narratives suggest that the ritual of the wedding 'may well have been the point when slave behaviour on antebellum plantations most nearly correspond to that of whites.'⁶⁹ In particular, they cite examples of enslaved women who dressed in white gowns on their wedding day, usually cast offs

⁶⁸ Laura Bell, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 102.

⁶⁹ White and White, *Stylin'*, 32.

from their mistress, which were then adapted with the addition of bows or sashes.⁷⁰ The wedding day certainly seemed to represent the culmination of the courtship process for many of the enslaved. Despite its lack of legal meaning, the wedding day was considered as an integral part of enslaved relationships. It not only served to validate their union but in certain cases, allowed the enslaved to temporarily shed their status as “slave” and embrace an alternative image of themselves.

In several of the WPA narratives, the wedding ceremonies of the enslaved were likened to those of the white elite, the clothing being cast offs from their master and mistress and the ceremony being taken by a preacher rather than the slave-owner. The enslaved whose weddings did occur in this manner were usually domestic or favoured slaves of their master and mistress, and their white owners played a prominent part in the proceedings of the day. Alice Baugh, in recalling the story of her parent’s wedding day, remarked that a preacher in the Methodist church married them. Her mother, she claimed ‘...w’ar Miss Mary’s weddin’ dress, all uv white lace, an’ dat my pappy w’ar Mr Charlie’s weddin’ suit wid a flower in de button hole. Dey gived a big dance atter de supper dey had, an’ master Charlie dance de fust set wid my mammy.’⁷¹ The images Alice Baugh relates of her parent’s wedding day are haunted by the presence of Miss Mary and Mr Charlie, whose physical ownership of their slaves had extended into “ownership” of their emotional lives too. The assumed rights of the slave-owner over the emotional life of the enslaved will be discussed further in Chapter Six. Nonetheless, the significance of this type of wedding day for the enslaved should not be dismissed. Such events were mediated by the enslaved in order that they might negotiate their own desire for zones of emotional autonomy that were both of, and apart from, the world of the plantation.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 32-33.

⁷¹ Alice Baugh, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 84.

In the narrative of Aunt Sally, who was enslaved in Fayetteville, her own wedding day is described with a similar emphasis on the second hand style that she and her groom, Abram, were forced to adopt at the altar:

Sally's scant wardrobe had been growing less in her mother's absence and now she had no decent dress for the occasion. Her mistress produced from her own stores an old white muslin frock, and added to it a bright ribbon for her waist and a gauze handkerchief to tie around her head. Abram was equally destitute, and his coarse field dress was exchanged for the time for some cast off clothes of his masters', which made him look, so Sally thought, quite like a gentleman.⁷²

In the above passage, Sally seems quite pleased at Abram's attire, suggesting that it made him look *quite like a gentleman*. Many of the enslaved appeared to have felt privileged to have their wedding compared to that of their master and mistress. The scale of the ceremony, including the presence of a preacher, the distinctive dress, and an excuse for a large social gathering, provided fundamental and specific meaning to a union that legally did not exist. Outlawed throughout the South, marriage between enslaved couples was made to seem more "real" to those participating when a ceremony and certain particulars were attended to. Richard Moring remembered the weddings between enslaved couples on the plantation on which he lived in Wake County:

When dere was a weddin' dar wus fun fer all, case hit wus a big affair. Dey wus all dressed up in new clothes, an' marster's dinin' room wus decorated wid flowers fer de 'casion. De ban' which wus banjos, an fiddles 'ud play

⁷² "Aunt Sally or Cross the Way of Freedom: A Narrative of the Slave Life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams of Detroit," (American Reform Tract and Book Society, 1858), *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*, 51.

an' de neighborin' folk 'ud come...atter hit wus ober an' de songs wus sung marster's dinin' table wus set an' dar wus a weddin' supper fer all.⁷³

Certainly, formerly enslaved men and women, such as Richard Moring, believed that these weddings were comparable, in both significance and display, to those of the elite white population. The narratives of women who had married when enslaved in the American South often communicated this romantic ideal of their wedding day, comparing it to that of their white mistress or simply emphasising the ideal elements of the occasion. Tempie Herndon married Exter Durham in a wedding held on her master's plantation in Chatham County:

When I growed up I married Exter Durham. He belonged to Marse Snipes Durham who had de plantation 'cross de county line in Orange County. We had a big weddin'. We was married on de front po'ch of de big house. Marse George killed a shoat an' Mis' Betsy had Georgianna, de cook, to bake a big weddin' cake all iced up as white as snow wid a bride an' groom standin' in de middle holdin' han's. De table was set out in de yard under de trees...Dat was some weddin'. I had on a white dress, white shoes an' long white gloves dat come to my elbow, an' Mis' Betsy done made me a weddin' veil out of a white net window curtain. When she played de weddin' ma'ch on de piano, me an' Exter ma'ched down de walk an' up on de po'ch to de altar Mis' Betsy done fixed. Dat de pretties' altar I ever seed. Back 'gainst de rose vine dat was full or red roses, Mis' Betsy done put tables filled wid flowers an' white candles. She done spread down a bed

⁷³ Richard C. Moring, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 139-140.

sheet, a sho nuff linen sheet, for us to stan' on, an' dey was a white pillow to kneel down.⁷⁴

Tempie's recollection of her wedding day is infused with notions of romance and her narrative offers evidence of the ways that the enslaved were able to participate in marriage ceremonies that were comparable to that of their white master and mistress, both in terms of the meaning derived from these occasions and the showy accessories that adorned the event. However, Tempie's narrative also revealed the limits that were placed on her ability to fulfil such romantic ideals as a slave in the American South. She revealed that her wedding veil was made from an old net window curtain and later in the narrative she mentioned Exter's gift to her of a ring, 'He made it out of a big red button wid his pocket knife. He done cut it so roun' an' polished it so smooth dat it looked like red satin ribbon tide 'roun' my finger. Dat sho was a pretty ring. I wore it 'bout fifty years, den it got so thin dat I lost it one day in de wash tub when I was washin' clothes.'⁷⁵ Tempie and Exter's status as slaves is revealed through such comments. The *satin red ribbon* was in reality a red button that eventually wore away. Tempie's white gown, gloves and shoes were complimented by a makeshift veil made from an old net curtain that her mistress no longer needed. These aspects of Tempie's wedding day seem particularly stark when considered against the backdrop of the idealised romantic images that also littered her narrative, such as the flowers, white candles and wedding cake. Tempie's narrative is structured by a sense of pathos as she and Exter can be seen to be taking part in a drama, which was not of their own making, exposed by elements such as the net window curtain and the shiny red button.

⁷⁴ Tempie Herndon Durham, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 286-88. The "shoat" that was killed for Tempie and Exter's wedding celebrations refers to a newly weaned piglet.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

As Chapter Six will stress we also cannot avoid the presence of Tempie's mistress and master in the wedding scene. Miss Betsy, it seemed, had been enveloped by the rhetoric of love and romance that was popular within her own social class. At the wedding of a favoured domestic slave's wedding, such as Tempie's, Miss Betsy saw an opportunity for herself to partake in these representations of romantic love. The irony of Miss Betsy's actions was most clearly illustrated when Tempie referred to the end of the day, when she and Exter retired to their cabin together. 'After de weddin' we went down to de cabin Mis' Betsy done all dressed up, but Exter couldn' stay no longer dat night kaze he belonged to Marse Snipes Durham an' he had to back home.'⁷⁶ Their condition as slaves prevented them from living together as husband and wife, and Miss Betsy, as Tempie's mistress, was wholly compliant with this situation. However, she also provided a wedding day for Tempie and Exter predicated around free white notions of love and romance that would suggest the happy couple would be together as husband and wife, living happily ever after.

In spite of Miss Betsy's presence and involvement in the ceremony, Tempie managed to reclaim the event for herself and Exter. She recalled the day by signifying its fundamental aspects for herself and Exter, in contrast to the elements of the wedding that they believed were not for their benefit. 'Uncle Edmond Kirby married us. He was de nigger preacher dat preached at de plantation church. After Uncle Edmond said de las' words over me an' Exter, Marse George got to have his little fun. He say, come on Exter, you an' Tempie got to jump over de broomstick backwards; you got to do dat to see which one gwine be boss of your househol'.⁷⁷ The jumping of the broomstick was in Tempie's words *Marse George's little fun* and not necessary or significant to Tempie and Exter's wedding day. Tempie emphasised the aspects of the wedding that were important to her, such as being married by a preacher, the dress she wore and Exter's

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 288.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 287

gift of a ring, and then ridiculed those elements introduced wholly by her master, such as the jumping of the broomstick.

The custom of jumping the broomstick at the weddings of enslaved couples was more commonly used if a preacher was not available. The master would carry out the ceremony and the union would then be symbolised by the couple jumping over the broomstick. The jumping of the broomstick was a common ritual at the weddings of enslaved couples, but many who had participated in this custom, or who recalled their parent's part in this particular practice, usually mentioned the fact that after emancipation they went and got married "properly." Rena Raines was typical of many accounts in the North Carolina narratives when she described the marriage of her mother and father. 'Mother and father married by jumpin' de broom. Dey put de broom down on de floor den dey helt one another's hands an ' dey jumped de broom, den dey went ter de slave house an' went ter bed. *Mother an' father come ter Raleigh atter de surrender an' wus married right.*'⁷⁸ The jumping of the broomstick provided informal recognition of the enslaved couple's union by the slave-owner, and perhaps provided a limited form of ritual through which the enslaved might have felt that their relationship was less temporary or more secure. Yet once emancipation occurred, many of the enslaved who had "jumped the broomstick", sought to sanctify their relationship in religious and legal terms. In 1866 nearly twenty thousand formerly enslaved men and women in North Carolina registered their marriage with county clerks and Justices of the Peace, paying a fee of twenty-five cents. They thus actively sought official recognition that they were a legally bound couple.⁷⁹

The wedding represented the culmination of courtship for the enslaved and provided an obvious sign of the strength and sincerity of an enslaved couple's relationship. The wedding ceremony must also have provided an outward display of the

⁷⁸ Rena Raines, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 195. (emphasis added).

⁷⁹ See Gutman, *The Black Family*, 14.

complex and intricate processes of courtship that preceded the event. Even though the marriage meant nothing in legal terms the enslaved participated in these ceremonies in order to authenticate and confirm their relationship with and to each other, and also perhaps, in the hope that they would be less likely to be separated at a later date by their master or mistress.

This chapter has outlined the ways in which the enslaved mediated the time and space of their surroundings in order to establish and maintain a courting relationship. It has suggested that they were able to manipulate the meaning of authorised social events, organised by the slave-owner, to fit their own demands and needs. In addition, it has also argued that they established a distinct and separate social context within which courtship could occur away from the confines and regulations imposed by the slave-owner.

As the next chapter will illustrate enslaved couples might have faced great obstacles from within the slave system when pursuing a courtship, yet it was not always the controls of the slave system and slave-owner that presented a barrier to the establishment of a courting relationship. This chapter has illustrated the values and ideals of the enslaved themselves, which further complicated this process. Enslaved men and women would go to great lengths in order to attract the attention of their intended. The enslaved may also have been influenced in their choice of suitor by the advice and guidance of their parents or close relatives. The courting relationship was thus a complicated and complex process for the enslaved, which was made no easier by the slave-owner's assumed right to control their emotional affairs.

Chapter Six

Risking Life and Limb: Courtship as Resistance

Courtship occurred for the enslaved within the rigidly defined boundaries of a slave system, which was established, maintained and protected by white society. As the previous chapter has already argued, the slave body was contained within the controlled and controlling landscapes defined by the slave-owner. Whilst periods of licensed leisure provided the enslaved with the opportunity to engage in practices of courtship, these events were organised on the slave-owner's terms, and consequently during these periods the enslaved remained subject to the regulations of the master and mistress. In order to actively pursue a courting relationship outside of these boundaries, enslaved men and women had to resist and renegotiate the power relationships that lay at the heart of slavery in the American South. The enslaved were thus engaged in a constant struggle with the slave-owner to define the shape and content of their courting experiences. Consequently, courtship can be read as part of a wider discourse of resistance for the enslaved, as they sought to subvert and undermine the systems of authority that shaped their emotional lives.

6.1: The Role of the Slave-Owner in the Emotional Life of the Enslaved

The slave-owner occupied a distinct role in directing the emotional life of the enslaved. As this chapter shall illustrate, even as the slave was defined in terms of property by the southern legal system, the slave-owner was forced to acknowledge the emotional dimensions of enslaved life. Moreover, in accepting the existence of a personal and intimate dynamic in the lives of the enslaved, slave-owners were able to exploit and manipulate such relationships for their own ends. It provided a valuable mechanism of control for the slave-owner as it allowed them to extend their reach of power into the most private elements of enslaved life. However, acknowledging that the enslaved possessed the capacity to form strong and stable personal relationships also

served to expose the lie of the southern legal system that denied the enslaved their right to personhood.

The slave owner expected that their consent would be a necessary element in shaping the form and content of courting relationships between enslaved couples. As the previous chapter has already outlined, the granting of privileges, such as permission to leave the plantation at certain times, were expected by the enslaved, and formed part of the informal social contract that operated between the slave-owner and the enslaved. Yet, in seeking to govern and control the emotional lives of their slaves, the slave-owner was able and willing to manipulate the more informal rules and regulations of the plantation. Some slave-owners refused to allow particular individuals, or sometimes the entire plantation's labour force, the rights to go off visiting, even during the holiday period. The slave-owner was fully aware that this manipulation of the social rules governing plantation life could have profound consequences on the ability of the enslaved to establish and maintain personal relationships. Yet in broadening the extent of their dominion to include that of the emotional lives of the enslaved, the slave-owner ironically recognised the personhood of their enslaved labour force. Through implicitly locating the personal relationships of the enslaved at the heart of plantation regulation, the slave-owner acknowledged their fundamental significance to the enslaved, and thus recognised that they were capable of experiencing emotions such as love, heartache and grief.

William Pettigrew wrote to his slave overseers whom he had left in charge of his two plantations, Belgrade and Magnolia, on Lake Scuppernong, in Washington County. Pettigrew wrote to them a few days before Christmas in 1857, instructing them that no slave was to leave the plantation during this time, owing to an occurrence of trouble between his own slaves and the slaves on a neighbouring plantation. He ordered, '...[I think that] the people had better stay at home during Christmas holydays; no good can result from their going to the lake & it might be that some evil would. If no more, it might bring about a quarrel among my people & some of those at the lake respecting the

money stolen by Frank...My idea is stay at home & mind your business & let other people mind theirs.’¹ Pettigrew’s instructions were based on his fear that any sort of gathering amongst the local slaves might have led to a social disturbance. However, it was also a means through which he could punish his slaves by removing their social privileges. As Chapter Four has argued, Christmas was a particularly significant period for the enslaved, when they were usually given the freedom to establish and maintain social ties beyond the physical boundaries of the plantation. Pettigrew’s punishment would have been sorely felt within the quarters of the enslaved on the plantation. This act served to deny the enslaved their expected social privileges during the festive season, including those of socialising and courtship, while at the same time enhancing Pettigrew’s image as an authoritarian and masterful slave-owner.

Pettigrew’s punishment was particularly menacing because the enslaved on his plantations had come to expect such rights. Certain slave-owners were not willing to cede any amount of personal time to the enslaved in order that they might pursue social relationships. Moreover, it was emphasised by some slave-owners that any free time that was granted should be engaged in industrious activity. Henry Burgwyn writing from Boston to his overseer on his plantation in Northampton County, granted his slaves two days holiday as a reward after they had laid by the crop, but he instructed his overseer, ‘...they must not go off the plantation they must work their own crops.’² Slave-owners such as Burgwyn denied the enslaved the capacity to build social relationships and develop the extent of their emotional lives. His role in manipulating and controlling the personal affairs of the enslaved on his plantation signifies their fundamental importance to systems of control and regulation in the slave South.

¹ 18 December 1857, from William Pettigrew, Halifax County, North Carolina to his slave overseers, Moses and Henry on Belgrade and Magnolia Plantations, Washington County, Pettigrew Family Papers, 1685, 1776-ca.1939, box 10, fol. 207, Dec 1857, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

² 6 August 1843, from Henry King Burgwyn, Boston, to his overseer, M. Arthur Souter, Burgwyn Family Papers, 1787-1987, fol. 1, correspondence, 1787, 1843, 1846, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

Conversely, the attempts of slave-owners such as Burgwyn and Pettigrew to interfere with and control the emotional aspects of enslaved life uncovered a fundamental contradiction in the southern slave system. The legal system defined the slave as socially dead. Although the slave existed as a legal personality, this was defined through and by their status as property. The slave had no legal rights to be recognised as beings who were distinct or separate from the terms of ownership and possession under which they were held. They were not legally entitled to work for their own benefit, to own property or to move freely about the local area. Only the slave-owner was entitled to grant such entitlements to the slave. Thus the right to cultivate a garden patch or leave the plantation was dependent on the authority and consent of the slave-owner. In the eyes of the law, each slave was regarded as an individual unit of property, detached and isolated from any other social relationships, except from that of their master and mistress. Thus, in southern legal terms, 'Without the master...the slave does not exist. The slave came to obey him not only out of fear, but out of the basic need to exist as a quasi-person, however marginal and vicarious that existence might be.'³

Yet the desire of the slave-owner to shape the emotional contours of enslaved life reflected their tacit acknowledgement that the slave did exist as individual beyond the master/slave dichotomy. If the slave could create and maintain relationships outside of the matrix of domination and authority imposed by the slave-owner, and supported by the southern legal system, then the lie of slavery, that the black slave was in all ways innately inferior to that of their white master, was in danger of being exposed. In actively developing and claiming their rights to a semi-autonomous emotional space, the enslaved were undermining the explicit networks of power that structured their lives and that maintained the system of slavery in the South. Thus, it was imperative that slave-owners controlled not only the physical aspects of their slave's existence but also the form and content of their personal and intimate lives.

³ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, (Cambridge, Mass, London, Harvard University Press, 1982), 46.

The emotional life of the enslaved was a significant terrain on which the slave-owner could exercise their sense of authority and claims of ownership. As in cases where the slave-owner refused to grant their consent for the enslaved to leave the plantation, slave-owners also used threats of sale and separation as a tool to discipline and punish the enslaved. Sarah Devereux in a letter to her brother Thomas, manager of her plantation in Halifax County, demonstrated how the slave-owning classes manipulated the fundamental importance of personal ties to the enslaved and how these were used in the plantation system of control and regulation. She wrote of Sally, a female slave ‘...I have pondered much upon Sallys conduct...I told Sally if such should be the case I would sell her and in the very face of my threat...but now it is very hard to sell her, and three children, or without them, I am much perplexed and do not know what is my duty.’⁴ Sarah Devereux decided to devolve this “duty” to her brother, leaving the final decision of Sally’s future in his hands, telling him that ‘...if you think it best to make her an example sell her, you spoke of selling some of yours and may include her if you think best.’⁵ Sarah Devereux’s belief that selling Sally would *make an example of her* underlines the fact that slave-owners used the threat of sale as a means to regulate the behaviour of their entire enslaved labour force.

Despite the slave-owners’ manipulation and thus recognition of the emotional life of the enslaved they still defined their labour force as property first and foremost. Almost always the needs and interests of the enslaved were bypassed for the sake of the financial interest of the slave-owner. Ben Johnson, who was formerly enslaved to Gilbert Gregg, in Orange County, recalled how his brother, Jim, was sold and separated from him, in order to secure the money to dress the young mistress of the plantation for her wedding day. He remembered that he had sat under a tree and watched as they had

⁴ 4 December 1840, from Sarah E. Devereux, New Haven to Thomas Devereux, Halifax County, Devereux Family Papers, 1791-1936, fol. 3, correspondence 1791-1841. *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*,

⁵ *Ibid.*

sold his brother away ‘...I set dar an’ I cry an’ cry, specially when dey puts de chains on him an’ carries him off, an’ I ain’t neber felt so lonesome in my whole life.’⁶

It was ironic that Jim and many others like him were separated from their network of familial and social relationships in order to help their master or mistress cement their own. In Jim’s case his brother was sold to fund his young mistress’s wedding. Often the enslaved were given away to their master’s children and near relatives as wedding presents or as part of the marriage portion or dowry. New Yorker Sarah Hicks, who married Benjamin Williams, a slave-owner from Greene County in 1853, believed that her mother-in-law was spiteful towards her because, as a northerner, Sarah brought no slaves to the marriage. Sarah thought that her mother-in-law would, ‘...never forgive Ben for not marrying niggers, never, never, never!’⁷ The slave then was considered as a necessary feature to help further the romantic relationships of the white southern elite and the economic fortunes of the southern elite family. The bitter twist of irony lay in the fact that as the sale of the slave facilitated the union of two young white lovers, it might have undermined that of their enslaved counterparts.

The immense fear of being sold was used by the slave-owner as a powerful check on the behaviour of the enslaved. As Charlie Barbour commented in his interview for the WPA project, ‘...we w’oud ov been happy ‘cept dat we wuz skeered o’ bein sold.’⁸ The work of Herbert Gutman has documented the intense pain and often tragic consequences caused by sale and separation on the familial relationships of the enslaved.⁹ Furthermore, and as this thesis has already discussed, recent work by Emily

⁶ Ben Johnson, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 9.

⁷ 22 May 1855, from Sarah F. Hicks Williams, Greene County to Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Hicks, New Hartford, Sarah F. Hicks Williams Letters, 1836-1838, fol. 5, 1854-1855, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

⁸ Charlie Barbour, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 77.

⁹ See Gutman, *The Black Family*, especially Chapter One, “Send Me Some of the Children’s Hair”.

West has highlighted the mechanisms that the enslaved were forced to employ to cope with the pressures of local separations.¹⁰ It is evident from the testimony of some of the sources that the slave-owner used the emotional attachments of the enslaved as a means of discipline and control and that enslaved familial relationships were very often the casualties of such power relations.

The slave-owner's role and their significance in shaping the emotional life of the enslaved often depended on the character of the master or mistress themselves. In many cases the slave-owner was willing to manipulate the intimate ties of the enslaved in order to meet their own economic ends. Several of the respondents in the WPA narratives suggested that the slave-owner attempted to control the sexual unions of the enslaved on the plantation.¹¹ This was expressed most clearly in their coupling of particular enslaved individuals who they perceived as a suitable match. The slave-owner generally sought to join together healthy young women and men who would produce numerous offspring and consequently enhance the size of the plantation labour force.

Clara Jones recalled in her interview that, according to her master the primary reason for his slaves to marry was to reproduce. '...When de slaves on de McGee place got married de marster always said dat dere duty was ter have a houseful of chilluns fer him.'¹² Clara Jones' master considered a union between enslaved couple as ancillary to his own economic aims and demands. It is interesting to note that Clara's master placed a degree of responsibility upon those enslaved couples that he allowed to marry. He reminded them that it was their "duty" to provide him with new additions to his slave

¹⁰ See West, "Surviving Separation".

¹¹ The control of the slave-owner in the emotional lives of the enslaved may have changed over time, particularly after the outlawing of the slave trade in 1807. From this point onwards slave-owners were increasingly reliant on the reproduction of their slaves to enlarge their existing slave population and thus sexual relationships between enslaved men and women would have become of more significance to the slave-owner. However, as Chapter Four points out, slave-owners in North Carolina may have relied on the natural increase of their slave population long before 1807, owing to their limited involvement in the Atlantic slave trade.

¹² Clara Jones, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 32.

population. Whilst the enslaved on McGee's plantation may not have accepted or complied with such demands they cannot have failed to understand the ways in which their own emotional and intimate relationships were subject to the wider networks of power and domination inherent in the system of slavery. In contrast to the marriages of the white slave-owning population, whose duty was to each other, masters such as McGee emphasised the idea that a union between an enslaved couple was an intrinsic part of the means to maintain the system of slavery in the antebellum South.

Other slave-owners were not as subtle as McGee in the demands that they made on their slaves and the *duties* they imposed upon their relationships. Jacob Manson, who was enslaved in Wake County, recalled that 'A lot of de slave owners had certain strong healthy slave men to serve de slave women.'¹³ The practice of pairing up strong and healthy slave men with slave women, with complete disregard for the feelings of the individuals involved, occurred across the Carolinas. For example, Willie McCullough, remembered a story told to him by his mother regarding her experiences as a young enslaved woman in South Carolina. He recalled that, '...Mother tole me that when she became a woman at the age of sixteen years her master went to a slave owner near by and got a six foot nigger man, almost an entire stranger to her, and told her she must marry him. Her master read a paper to them, told them they were man and wife and told this negro he could take her to a certain cabin and go to bed. This was done without getting her consent or even asking her about it.'¹⁴

While stories of forced or arranged unions between the enslaved are not uncommon some slave-owners did understand and accept the importance of choice in establishing personal ties between enslaved couples. Based upon evidence contained in the WPA narratives, a more typical example of the way an enslaved couple's

¹³ Jacob Manson, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 98.

¹⁴ Willie McCullough, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 78.

relationship might progress was on the basis of a two-sided dialogue, whereby the slave-owner retained the ultimate control but the enslaved couple were still able to establish their own intimate ties within a limited sphere of options. Examples of this can be seen in the ways in which enslaved men were first required to gain permission to marry from both their own master and that of their intended partner. In 1823, Ben, who was enslaved to L. V. Hargis of Person County, wished to marry an enslaved woman belonging to Phillips Moore, of a nearby plantation. Mr Hargis wrote to Phillips Moore agreeing to the union and requesting his own blessing. Hargis wrote ‘...your note by Ben the 25th instant is before me stating – Ben has communicated to you his desire to take a wife among your negro women if it meets my approbation. As it appears the boy wants a wife I make no objections & if he undertakes I hope he will not disgrace his station.’¹⁵

There was in Mr Hargis’ note a sense of ridicule concerning Ben’s request. This was evident in the way Hargis referred to Ben as a *boy*, which invoked stereotypes of the enslaved man as childish and dependent and thus served to undermine Ben’s masculine identity and status. Hargis also seemed to assume that Ben did not understand the true nature of love and marriage. This was clearly illustrated in Hargis’ evaluation of Ben’s request, *As it appears the boy wants a wife...* Hargis failed to consider the emotional motivations and implications of Ben’s request and consequently it is possible to see the competing and contesting meanings that were embedded in the courtship experience of the enslaved.

Other slave-owners were not so flippant when considering the relationships of the enslaved. In certain cases slave-owners would use their influence in order to maintain or further relationships between enslaved couples. Ethelred Philips requested in a letter to his cousin, James Philips, that he hire two of his slaves for the year owing to their attachment to their families, who were owned by James Philips. Ethelred explained to James that ‘I send this by Henry whom I sent by Express with Dory to see his wife.

¹⁵ 27 August 1823, from L. V. Hargis, Point Pleasant, Person County to Phillips Moore, In Phillips Moore Papers, cited in Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 536.

They both seem so much attached to their families I could not have refused them this gratification even if it had not been promised. Please hire them for me this year. Dory would have been willing to stay entirely I think but could not as Henry was unwilling.’¹⁶ Ethelred Philips seemed then to understand the ties that bound both Henry and Dory to James Philips plantation and was consequently willing to hire them out for the year so that these ties could be retained.

The role of the slave-owner in maintaining and protecting ties between enslaved couples was often essential in cases where the enslaved were separated over some distance, usually due to planter migration westward. Slave-owners tended to retain ties with their own families on their home plantations or in the local area and consequently, the enslaved were dependent on the slave-owner to act as an intermediary between couples. This was a role that generally fell to slave mistresses. When the physical distance between an enslaved man and woman became too great they were occasionally forced to rely on the relationship to their mistress in order to preserve contact with each other. These circumstances served to emphasise the ways in which the dependency of the enslaved upon their master and mistress was written into the southern slave system. This was expressed not only through the slave-owner’s care of the physical needs of the enslaved but it was also displayed through the mistress’s management and maintenance of the personal relationships between enslaved men and women.

In the 1830s, Anna Bingham moved to the Rediman Plantation in Tennessee from North Carolina with her son, Robert and his wife Ann. Taking many of the slaves from their estate in North Carolina, they left behind Anna’s daughter Mary and her husband Thomas Lynch to run the plantation in Hillsborough, Orange County. The steady flow of correspondence between Anna and Anne in Tennessee to Mary revealed much about the role that the mistress occupied in maintaining and supervising the close

¹⁶ 21 December 1863, from Ethelred Philips to James Philips, James Jones Philips Papers, 1814, 1832-1892, series 1, fol. 2, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

personal relationships of the enslaved. In one such letter Anna wrote that the ‘black people also send [their love] to you Charlotte and Clarissa...[and]...to tell Charlotte and Clarissa their mother begs them to remember her parting advice. She requests me to give her love to London and tell him that Ovid walks all about and she wants to hear of him...’¹⁷ These three women functioned as vital links in the relationships between the enslaved on these two separate plantations. The enslaved were thus dependent on the benevolence of their mistress to forward their messages and favours. Anna frequently passed on messages, adding in her own thoughts on the situation or relationship in question. For example, in one letter she wrote of Caty, an enslaved woman, who had been restless since the move to Tennessee. Writing of a change for the better in Caty, Anna asked that Mary talk to Willie, perhaps a lover of Caty, whom she had been forced to leave behind in North Carolina. She wrote ‘...Do tell my dear Willie the poor creature speaks with distress of his not having spoken to her at parting, she says she did enough to make him angry but wants him to forgive her.’¹⁸ Certainly mistresses such as Anna did look beyond the image of human chattel when considering their slave’s needs. However, her interference and management in the personal relationships of her slaves, which she seemed to consider as necessary and worthwhile, further underlined the ways in which the slave-owner was implicated in the emotional lives of the enslaved.

In the same way that Anna Bingham attempted to cement the relationship between Caty and Willie, many mistresses took on the role of “matchmaker” for their slaves, selecting a “suitable” partner, usually for their favoured female domestics. This was a distinct process from that discussed earlier, in cases where the slave-owner simply paired off enslaved men and women for economic gain. Mistresses concerned themselves with the personal choices of enslaved women, directing and governing their

¹⁷ 30 March 1832, from Anna Bingham, Paris, Tennessee to Mary (Bingham) Lynch, Hillsborough, Orange County, Thomas and Mary Bingham Lynch Papers, 1794-1895, box 1, fol. 2, correspondence 1830-1837, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special collections Library, Duke University*.

¹⁸ 12 May 1832, *Ibid.*

selection of a husband. Whilst such behaviour may be read as a reflection of the close bonds that could develop between mistresses and their domestic slaves, it can also be understood as part of a implicit system of control and domination that operated on numerous levels.

Such a situation was related in the narrative of *Aunt Sally*, whose wedding to Abram was discussed in the previous chapter. Sally's mistress proposed the idea of marriage to her after Sally had been taken from fieldwork and placed as a domestic in her mistress's house. Her mistress decided that it was time that Sally had a husband and subsequently suggested the idea to her: '...Well Sally, you're thirteen years old and I want you to be married. There's a young man over on the plantation who'll make you a good husband.' The proposed husband was Abram Williams, an enslaved man from a nearby plantation, who also belonged to Sally's mistress. Sally was quite shocked at the idea of marriage but after this initial suggestion her mistress lost no time in pressing the subject with her, '...she lost no opportunity to speak of him to the simple hearted girl till Sally said, "pears like I loved him 'fore I ever saw him." True to her word the mistress sent for him. They were pleased with each other...there was no reason for delaying their union.'¹⁹

Sally's mistress adopted the role of "matchmaker" in this union. The pressure she exerted to force Sally and Abram together could be compared to the experiences of many young white women of the antebellum South, who faced well-meaning mothers, aunts and cousins, keen to have a hand in their romantic affairs. However, few young white women would have been forced into a relationship at such a young age, nor would they have been denied a voice in the matter.²⁰ Yet for Sally and Abram there was little notion of choice in the process of selection. For young southern white women their choice of beaux was usually extended through older female relatives introducing several

¹⁹ "Aunt Sally or Cross the Way of Freedom", 50-51,

²⁰ See Turner-Censer, *North Carolina Planters*, Chapter Four, "Courtship and Marriage Among the Planter's Offspring".

favoured young gentleman to them. For enslaved individuals such as Sally their options could be severely limited by the actions of their mistress.

This role as “match-maker” was an ironic feature in the mistress’s recognition of the emotional life of the enslaved. Whilst mistresses were willing to concede the right of the enslaved to pursue personal and intimate relationships, they often continued to direct the nature of such affairs. The shape and course of these unions was dependent upon the thoughts and actions of the slave mistress. In a perverse twist to these networks of power, slave mistresses displayed disappointment and a sense of being “let down” should the enslaved reject their choices and pursue their own courtship. For example, in 1840, Laura Norwood wrote to her mother and father, Thomas and Louisa Lenoir of Fort Defiance, Caldwell County, relating her concern over Eliza, her enslaved domestic, and her union with Elia, an enslaved man from Wilkesboro. She wrote ‘...Eliza has a very (?) suitor - whom report says is gaining ground in her favour, but I don’t know whether the case is hopeless yet. *I shall be very sorry if it is so for he is not of a very good family and they are all a very weakly sickly set he is brother of Bill, the little boy that came with us from Pa’s.*’²¹ By November of the same year Eliza had married her proposed suitor, who was possibly enslaved on the plantation of Laura Norwood’s sister, Annie in Wilkes County. Laura confided to her mother that ‘...*I have reason to regret Eliza’s trip to Wilkes and also her marriage with Elia,* but have time non for particulars.’²²

We might consider Laura Norwood’s opposition to Eliza’s marriage as being grounded in a desire for economic gain and also as a display of her own need to maintain power and authority over Eliza. She describes, for example, Elia’s family as a *weak and sickly set*, thus relating an unspoken fear that the union would produce children of a

²¹ 11 February 1840, from Laura Norwood to Col. Thomas and Louisa Lenoir, Fort Defiance, Caldwell County, Lenoir Family Papers, 1763-1936, series 1.2, box 6, fol. 78, Jan-Mar 1840, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*. (emphasis added).

²² November 1840, from Laura Norwood to Louisa Lenoir, Fort Defiance, Caldwell County, Lenoir Family Papers, 1763-1936, series 1.2, box 6, fol. 80, Oct-Dec 1840, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*. (emphasis added).

similar disposition. She may also have worried that the marriage might have created a restlessness in Eliza to be with her husband. Whatever the reason, it is possible to detect an element of personal disappointment in Laura Norwood's words over Eliza's choice of partner. She keenly felt that as one of her own favoured slaves Eliza could have bettered herself, had she allowed Laura to help her in the process of selection. Moreover Laura Norwood's comments revealed her belief that she had a right to interfere in the emotional dynamics of Eliza's life. Eliza however managed to reclaim ownership of her emotional life, asserted her right to choose her husband, and thus resisted the myriad tentacles of power that stole into the most intimate aspects of her life.

The slave-owner thus recognised the fundamental significance of personal and familial relationships to the enslaved. Consequently they were able to use them as a leverage of power over the enslaved and as a means to manipulate their behaviour. Mistresses in particular often asserted a right of ownership over this aspect of enslaved life. This was possibly because it was concerned with the personal and private world of familial relationships, which within the world of the southern white elite were understood as part of the private and domesticated sphere controlled and governed by women. Occasionally their interest in the personal affairs of a particular slave evidenced the twisted and peculiar notions of power and possession that structured the relationship between slave-owner and slave. However, in their recognition of the emotional needs of the enslaved the slave-owner implicitly acknowledged the personhood of their human chattel and paradoxically strengthened the basis of resistance for the enslaved against such controls.

6.2: Resisting and Renegotiating Terms of Ownership

The behaviour of enslaved women such as Eliza discussed in Laura Norwood's letter, posed an immediate threat to the authority of the mistress and master. The enslaved sought to reclaim rights of ownership over their personal relationships and

thus challenged and resisted the role of the slave-owner in their manipulation of emotional ties. Courtship in particular was a contested terrain upon which the enslaved struggled to define a distinct social space, characterised by relationships of their own choosing.

Practices of courtship can be understood then within the wider context of resistance for the enslaved. In actively pursuing their own relationships the enslaved were engaged in a defiant act of refusal, against both the slave-owner's supposed rights of authority, and the controls imposed by the slave system. As the slave-owner sought to regulate the nature of courtship between enslaved men and women so the enslaved became progressively more active in resisting such controls. Resistance, as Stephanie Camp has argued, should not be understood in terms of a division between '...material and political issues on the one hand and aesthetic, spiritual and intimate (emotionally and physically) issues on the other.'²³ Rather, the politics of the enslaved were shaped by daily and often covert acts of resistance that contested and challenged the networks of power and domination within which the southern slave system implicated them.

Michel Foucault suggested in his analysis of power that 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.'²⁴ Using Foucault's theory of power, it is possible to argue that the enslaved were required to resist the authority of the slave-owner from within the system of slavery. In using the very structures created to detain and retain them, courtship became a landscape on which the enslaved engaged in behaviour that undermined the authority of the slave-owner and rejected the wider systems of control and regulation embedded in the system of slavery.

James Scott has argued that most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the opportunity of engaging in open and organised political

²³ Camp, "Pleasures of Resistance", 536.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, (London, Penguin, 1990), 95.

activity. Thus, he claimed that in order to understand how such classes did manage to work the system to their own advantage it is necessary to understand the *everyday* forms of resistance that they engaged in. Scott suggested that this type of resistance ranged from foot dragging, desertion, feigned ignorance or sabotage, and concerned the ordinary yet constant struggle between subordinate classes and those who sought to extract labour, food, taxes, rents and interest from them.²⁵ This understanding of resistance is particularly relevant for the enslaved in the American South where Scott maintained ‘...These practices, which rarely if ever called into question the system of slavery *as such*, nevertheless achieved far more in their unannounced, limited and truculent way than the few heroic and brief armed uprisings about which so much has been written.’²⁶ Everyday resistance was thus informal, often hidden and largely concerned with instant gain rather than long-term advantage. Certain activities undertaken by the enslaved in the arena of courtship can be understood in terms of “everyday resistance”. They generally had no wider impact than on the immediate social world of the enslaved, yet they represented an implicit rejection of the rules of regulation and control that structured the experiences of enslavement in the antebellum South, most particularly in relation to the slave-owner’s assumed rights over the emotional dynamics of enslaved life.

6.3: Everyday Resistance: Escaping the Patrollers

As the previous chapter has already outlined the pass system required the enslaved to gain permission from the slave-owner before removing themselves from the boundaries of the plantation. Yet, as Chapter Five has further argued, the enslaved established alternative spaces and a “rival geography” to those authorised and sanctioned by the slave-owner. It was within these autonomous social spaces that the enslaved were

²⁵ James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (London, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985), xvi.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 34. (emphasis in original).

able to pursue their personal relationships away from the observations, of the slave-owner. Yet, in leaving the plantations without permission and moving through spaces that were beyond the physical reach of, and the boundaries imposed by, the slave-owner, the enslaved risked severe punishments at the hands of the local patrol gangs. As discussed in Chapter Four the patrol gangs consisted of white men from the local community who policed the movements of the enslaved after dark. In evading the patrol gangs the enslaved demonstrated their resistance to the measures that restricted their movements and consequently manipulated their emotional lives.

The discussion of everyday acts of resistance in this chapter will focus upon the activities and behaviour of enslaved men in particular. The WPA narratives from North Carolina relate specific tales in which enslaved men resisted and rejected the controls that regulated their emotional lives. In contrast, few of the narratives reveal the ways in which enslaved women were able to challenge and renegotiate these structures of power,

Evidence from other southern states can however provide examples of the more assertive behaviour of enslaved women within the realm of courtship. In South Carolina for example, Gus Feaster recalled that ‘De gals charmed us wid honeysuckle and rose petals hid in dere bosoms...Dey dried chennyberries and painted dem and wo’ em on a string around dere necks.’²⁷ Enslaved women were therefore able to use the arena of courtship in order to recover a sense of ownership over their bodies and the personal relationships they established. Indeed, Stephanie Camp’s research has focussed upon ways in which enslaved women in the antebellum South were able to reclaim their body as a source of pleasure, pride and self expression, and as a site of resistance, in the context of illicit frolics and social gatherings.²⁸ The focus on the courtship activities of men is not intended to suggest that enslaved women did not occupy an active role in the arena of courtship. Certainly the narratives from North Carolina do make limited

²⁷ Gus Feaster, quoted in White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?*, 143.

²⁸ See Camp, “Pleasures of Resistance”.

reference to the presence of enslaved women at illicit social gatherings and their punishment at the hands of the patrol gangs. However, the narratives do tend to focus upon the actions of enslaved men in particular, and thus this chapter is largely restricted to considering their behaviour rather than that of enslaved women.

Questions of mobility and social movement are key to this discussion of gendered methods of resistance. For several reasons enslaved women found their mobility rather more contained than that of their male counterparts. Often they had responsibilities to children or family, which tied them to the plantation and prevented them from leaving to visit their lover. Work regimes on the plantation also detained enslaved women, who were typically located in the fields or the plantation house.²⁹ Even enslaved women who had acquired a skill such as the seamstress or the midwife, as discussed in Chapter Four, were generally not required to leave the plantation in order for their occupation to be exploited by the slave-owner. In contrast, as Chapter Four has also noted, enslaved men were given wider opportunities to leave the confines of the plantation. The slave-owner might hire out enslaved men if they had acquired a skill such as carpenter or cooper. Alternatively, the slave-owner could move his skilled male slaves between two different plantations as and when their labour was required. Thus, enslaved men possessed a much greater degree of mobility than enslaved women, which was further illustrated in the courting relationship.

Emily West has already demonstrated the assertive role of enslaved men in the arena of courtship and familial relationships in South Carolina.³⁰ As West has argued, enslaved men faced grave risks and problems in making unauthorised visits to their families on separate plantations and this, ‘...suggests the position of (enslaved) husbands and fathers as protectors and risk-takers.’³¹ This pattern is also reflected

²⁹ For further discussion see White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman*, 70-79.

³⁰ West, *Love and Affection, Exploitation and Resistance*; West, “Surviving Separation”; West, “The Debate on the Strength of Slave Families.”

³¹ West, “The Debate on the Strength of Slave Families”, 238.

amongst the enslaved of North Carolina where typically it was enslaved men who made the dangerous journey to visit a wife or girlfriend on another plantation. As the previous chapter has already begun to explore, the desire to court or socialise with members of the neighbouring enslaved community forced the enslaved to devise methods to evade and outwit the local patrollers. Hugh Berry and his companions, discussed in Chapter Five, were fully aware of the threat that the patrol gang posed to their personal safety, yet they still persisted in leaving the plantation after dark to make such illicit visits.

Enslaved men faced severe dangers in confronting the patrollers, who were aware of their authority over the slave, and who lost no opportunity to exploit this in their favour. Blount Baker, who had been enslaved in Wilson County, recalled his experiences of the ways in which the patrol gangs manipulated the emotional needs and desires of the enslaved. He explained that ‘...I know once a patteroller tol’ me dat iffen I’d give him a belt I found *dat he’d let me go by ter see my gal dat night*, but when he kotch me dat night he whupped me.’³² The patrol gang were fully conscious of their own authority and they were not reluctant to implement punishments and abuse their position at the expense of the physical safety and emotional well-being of the enslaved.

Often the slave-owner resented the patrol gang’s encroachment of their own authority over the slave population. Consequently, the power of the patrollers was mediated by the influence of the master and mistress. The enslaved were occasionally able to use their owner’s leverage against the patrol gangs, and thus it is possible to see the contradictory and conflicting relations of power that structured enslaved life in the antebellum South. For example, in Blount Baker’s case he informed his master of the situation and the patroller was made to give the belt to Master Henry, who gave Blount a possum for it in return. Blount’s actions represented an explicit means of retaliation against the patroller. Through informing his master of the event, Blount was able to exploit his relationship with the slave-owner to his own advantage. This however may

³² Blount Baker, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 64. (emphasis added).

have been the consequence of Master Henry's own feelings that his authority had been undermined, rather than an expression of his paternalism or benevolence. While the actions of Master Henry underlined his ultimate authority over both Blount and the patroller, the case also illustrates the ways in which the enslaved might appropriate the power of the slave-owner for their own ends.

The threat from the patrol gangs was explicit though and these local white men exercised their authority with a zeal that perhaps exposed their limited access to power in the wider public domain. John Bectom recalled in his WPA interview the harsh punishments that the patrol gangs would dish out to any slave found away from the plantation without a pass. Referring to the secret dances and parties his enslaved grandmother had attended he remarked that, 'While they would be there the patterollers would visit them. Sometimes the patterollers whipped all they caught at this place, all they set their hands on, unless they had a pass.'³³ W. L. Bost remembered how the patrol gangs meted out their punishments, '...If you wasn't in your proper place when the paddrollers come they lash you til' you was black and blue. The women got 15 lashes and the men 30. That is for jes bein' out without a pass.'³⁴

However, occasionally the enslaved faced much more severe threats than a whipping from the patrollers. Whilst the authority of the master could be used to undermine that of the patrol gangs, the enslaved were forced to confront the physical threat the gangs represented, when they discovered a secret frolic or social gathering in progress. Enslaved reaction to the patrol gangs in such situations could represent explicit and outright resistance to a system that sought to control and regulate their lives. Fannie Moore, who was enslaved on the Moore Plantation in South Carolina, remembered that

³³ John. C. Bectom, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The America Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 93.

³⁴ W. L. Bost, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 141.

on one occasion, when the patrollers had arrived at a dance, one of the enslaved men stood his ground against them and lost his life in the act:

Uncle Joe's son he decide dey was one time to die and he sta't to fight. He say he tired standin' so many beatin's, he jes can't stan' no mo'. De paddyrollers start beatin' him and he sta't fightin'...Dey whip him wif a cowhide for a long time den one of dem take a stick an' hit him over de head, an' jus' bus his head wide open.³⁵

Despite this overt and direct resistance, the enslaved in North Carolina typically reacted against the rules and regulations that ultimately detained them on the plantation in a much more implicit and covert manner. The patrol gangs were evaded, the slave-owner's rules rejected. Courtships continued under the cloak of secrecy and the cover of darkness. For example, Celia Robinson was born on the McKnight plantation, in Louisburg, Franklin County. Her father however lived on a neighbouring plantation, belonging to Dr Wiley Perry. Celia recalled the story told to her by her parents that her father continued to make unauthorised visits to her mother in spite of warnings from the patrollers, developing secret signs that indicated his arrival. 'I 'member when my father would come ter see mother. De patterrollers tole him if he didn't stop coming home so much dey was goin' to whip him. He had a certain knock on de door den mother would let him in.'³⁶ The system of *secret signs* to indicate the arrival of one's lover highlights the ways in which courtships of the enslaved could proceed, and the warnings and threats from the patrol gangs resisted. It also reflects the subversive and alternative means of communication between enslaved couples that in many ways may have served to strengthen the degree of intimacy between them. The nature of their relationship

³⁵ Fannie Moore, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 132.

³⁶ Celia Robinson, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 218.

demanded that Celia's mother and father develop their own codes, understood only by the young courting couple, and essential for the continuance of their union. It is significant that the courting relationship was characterised not only by the secret movement of people, but also covert means of communicating with each other, thus highlighting the sense of resistance that structured these courtships.

Penny Williams, who was enslaved in Raleigh and belonged to Lawrence Hinton, recalled that both overseer and patroller were involved in the whipping of slaves who absconded from the plantation at night. However, as Penny remarked, '...dat ain't stop em.' Eventually Hinton attempted to prevent his slaves from leaving at night by tying cowbells around their neck so he might hear them if they decided to leave the plantation after dark. This action only seemed to increase the desire of enslaved men to continue in their pursuit of courting relationships. Penny Williams explained that, '*...Dar wus some nigger mens what 'ud go courtin' spite of de debil, ...Dey ain't got sense nuff ter put dere han's in de bell ter keep de clapper from ringin'*, but dey does stuff de bell wid leaves an' it doan ring none, '*sides dat dey tears deir shirts, or steals sheets from missus clothes line an' fold dem ter make a scarf. Dey ties dese roun' deir necks ter hide de bell an' goes on a-courtin'*'.³⁷ In spite of the threat of the patrol gangs, the whippings promised by the overseer and the preventative measures taken by the slave-owner to detain his slaves on the plantation, enslaved men carried on their courting activities. It is possible to see challenges and resistance in their reaction to the regulatory measures imposed on their lives.

These acts of resistance were often not overt, nor would they be classed as "political" in the sense that they did not actively seek to destroy the system of slavery. Yet, in exercising their right to engage in courtships and social relations beyond the plantation, the enslaved were rejecting the wider relations of power that structured their lives. Furthermore, avoiding the threat of the patrol gangs in order to pursue a courtship

³⁷ Penny Williams, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 402-03. (emphasis added).

also allowed enslaved men to display a sense of masculine pride and honour that challenged white understandings of the gendered characteristics of enslaved men. Evidence from the narratives suggests that boldness and daring were celebrated aspects of enslaved men's gendered identity within the enslaved community. The pursuit of a courtship and all this involved, in terms of escaping and evading the patrol gangs, allowed for enslaved men to enhance their own sense of masculine identity and resist the negative gendered characteristics imposed upon them by the slave system. These notions directly contradicted the "sambo" image of enslaved men constructed in the white imagination and discussed in Chapter Two.

In order to court and hence display their masculine prowess, enslaved men were first required to overcome the physical obstacles represented by the patrol gangs. One former enslaved man recalled that '...we set traps to catch the patterollers...we stretched grape vines across the roads, then we would run from them. They would follow, and get knocked off their horses.'³⁸ These practices of evasion helped to cultivate a sense of camaraderie amongst enslaved men, who were united in their efforts to undermine and outsmart the patrollers in order to pursue a courtship. The previous chapter has already discussed the narrative of Hugh Berry, who recalled that every couple of nights four or five enslaved men would leave the plantation in order to court and socialise with the neighbouring enslaved community. One of the key aspects of Hugh Berry's account was escaping the patrol gangs, which was represented as a common bond that united the enslaved men involved. The contest of courtship and the essence of resistance that structured many courtship experiences served to bolster enslaved men's sense of masculine identity, not only in the context of an intimate union, but also between enslaved men themselves.

Sometimes, enslaved men would act alone rather than in groups against the patrol gangs. At times individual tales of trickery and cunning became known throughout the

³⁸ Sam T. Stewart, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 321.

enslaved community. These stories served to enhance the masculine image of enslaved men who actively resisted or challenged the patrol gangs, and the methods of control that structured their courtship experiences. In one such story, Leon Berry recalled his Uncle Jim who tricked the paterollers night after night while he visited his girl who lived on the other side of the river. Jim had access to a boat, which he used to cross the river at night and hide in a thicket, so that the patrollers could not catch him. One night however, it seemed as if Jim was finally to meet his fate,

...So, one night he went over there sittin' in his girls house talkin' and the patteroller came up and say, hollered, Oh! We got Jim tonight, we got 'im! And Jim then say nothin'. Jim he had a little window, didn't have one on the doors, but they had little windows where you could look out so Jim got up and scooted out that little window and tore out down to the river, an' they go after 'im on with their horse but they couldn't catch him.

In a moment of ultimate triumph, Jim sailed his boat out of the river and turned to the patrol gang shouting ' "Yeah Hinskies, come and get me!...How Lord, I'll be back one night next week, but you won't catch me!' Jim, we are told by Leon Berry was never caught by the patrollers though he continued to make his trips across the river to court his girl.³⁹

Jim embodied the ideal of a "trickster", a cunning character, who outsmarted those in authority through the use of wit and resourcefulness, rather than brute force. The trickster character, as he was reflected in the folklore tales and narratives of the enslaved, will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Seven. Here we can note that the methods employed by the enslaved to resist the regulation of their emotional lives were often associated with resourcefulness and wit rather than physical or brutal confrontation. Indirect, implicit and covert methods of resistance were available and commonly employed by enslaved men in their bid to pursue a courtship. In fact, tales of

³⁹ Interview with Leon Berry, Long Creek, North Carolina, Glenn Hinson Collection, 1980, *Southern Folklore Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

courtship structured within a narrative of resistance celebrated the actions of enslaved men, who emerged victorious through outsmarting the patroller using such methods.

6.4: Everyday Resistance: Redefining Gendered Identities

Chapter Two has illustrated the ways in which the identity of the enslaved was sexualised in the American South. Enslaved women were defined as embodying a rampant and animalistic sexuality that placed them outside the bonds of “respectable” white womanhood, which was predicated around ideas of chastity and purity. Enslaved men were considered as sexually threatening to white women, yet also relatively powerless in their relationship to white men. This thesis has also illustrated the ways in which the gender divisions between enslaved men and women were blurred through the work regimes in the fields of the plantation. Courtship however, provided the enslaved with an arena within which they were able to reclaim a positive gendered identity, denied them in their role as labourers. Furthermore, in the social space that courtship provided, the enslaved were able to reject and redefine those accusations of promiscuity, licentiousness and immorality that were believed by the white southern elite to govern the behaviour of slave men and women in such relationships. Courtship thus allowed for enslaved men and women to act in a manner that contradicted white assumptions regarding the nature of masculine and feminine characteristics amongst the enslaved.

Moreover, within the realm of courtship, enslaved men and women adopted specific gendered attributes that were in many ways modelled on the feminine and masculine characteristics displayed by the white southern elite in the context of courtship and familial relationships. As Chapter Two has already discussed the idealised image of the southern white elite woman was based upon notions of purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity. Consequently, in the realm of courtship she was expected to be cautious, chaste and concerned with maintaining her feminine

respectability and honour.⁴⁰ Complementing this ideal of the elite white southern women was her male counterpart. Elite southern white men were required to act in order to defend and preserve the reputations and honour of elite white women. This was particularly so in the context of courtship and the marital relationship where elite white southern men occupied the dominant role and were expected to protect and provide for their family, and in particular their female dependents.⁴¹

Enslaved courtships were carried out along specific gendered lines that in part reflected the feminine and masculine roles occupied by the white southern elite in this particular sphere, and also rejected the defeminised and demasculinised identities imposed upon them in their status as slaves. For example, Jacob Thomas, who had been enslaved in Georgia and had moved to North Carolina after the Civil War, married Pheobe in the year that the war began. He described Pheobe as a ‘...slim little brown skinned girl what look so puny dat yo’ jist natu’ally wants ter take care of her.’⁴² Jacob expressed his affections for Pheobe on the basis of his desire to protect and look after her. He was thus able to assume the masculine role of “protector” in the context of this relationship. Such identities were denied to enslaved men on the plantation. In their status as slaves they were not entitled to any legal claim over their wife or children and they were denied the right as a husband and father to care for and protect their family. As the previous chapter has already discussed, enslaved men nevertheless derived alternative meanings from practical activities such as hunting, which allowed them to

⁴⁰ For further discussion see Scott, *The Southern Lady*; Nancy Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology”, *Signs*, 4 (1978-9); Welter “The Cult of True Womanhood”; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*; Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Children*.

⁴¹ For further discussion see Bertram Wyatt Brown, *Southern Honour: Ethics and Behaviour in the Old South*, (Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1982); Robert. M. Ireland, “The Libertine must Die: Sexual Dishonour and the Unwritten Law in the Nineteenth Century United States”, *Journal of Social History*, 23 (Autumn, 1989), 27-44; Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*; Robert Griswold, “Divorce and the Legal Redefinition of Victorian Manhood” in Marc Carnes and Clyde Griffen, [eds.], *Meanings for Manhood*, (Illinois, University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁴² Jacob Thomas, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 350.

adopt the particular masculine role of “provider” in the context of courtship and familial relationships. Similarly, enslaved men were able to take on the mantle of “protector” in their courting relationships with women.

The status of enslaved men as “protector” in their courtships emerges in several of the recollections of formerly enslaved men and women. For example, Lily Perry met her husband, Robert, whilst they were both enslaved on Jerry Perry’s plantation, near Louisburg, Franklin County. Their courtship was a complex process in which Robert became Lily’s protector. She explained that, ‘I know how he uster hate ter see me git dem beatin’s an’ he’d beg me not ter let my mouth be so sassy, but I can’t help hit. He uster take my beatin’s when he could an’ a heap of times he sneak out ter de fiel’s in de ebenin an’ toted dat slops ter de pigs.’⁴³ Lily was not a submissive woman. She admitted that her mouth was *sassy* and that she was unable to stop talking back. Yet, in the course of Lily’s story, Robert is revealed as her protector. He remained willing to take her beatings in spite of his pleas to Lily that she minded her mouth. He also eased her responsibilities in completing some of her daily tasks, such as feeding the pigs. Whilst Lily was cast as the assertive character of their relationship, Robert communicated certain attributes in the course of their courtship that served to emphasise his masculine identity as “protector”.

Robert defended Lily’s after they had begun to court. However, other enslaved men would make chivalrous efforts to protect a woman in order to gain their favour. Laura Bell, whose narrative was discussed in the previous chapter, recalled how her father, Wesley, made his first impressions on her mother, Minerva Jane, on Mack Strickland’s plantation near Mount Airy. She explained that ‘Marse Mack’s overseer, I doan know his name, wus gwine ter whip my mammy onct, an’ pappy *do’ he aint neber*

⁴³ Lily Perry, interviewed for the WPA narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 165.

*make no love ter mammy comes up an' takes de whuppin' fer her.'*⁴⁴ This gallant act by Wesley established a courting relationship with Minerva Jane where they '...cou'ts on Sadday an' Sunday an' at all de sociables till dey gits married.'⁴⁵

Inflicting whippings on recalcitrant female slaves was intended to strip enslaved women such as Minerva Jane and Lily of their sense of feminine identity. Their subjection to a whipping served to reinforce the notion that they were not "real women" at all but rather animals or brutes in need of discipline and punishment. In the act of defending these women, Wesley and Robert had protected them from harm and helped them both to retain a degree of femininity. In "taking a whipping" these enslaved men could assert their own sense of masculine identity, transforming them from "slave" to "protector", not only of a woman's physical safety but also her own sense of feminine virtue. Such behaviour redefined prevailing white beliefs regarding the nature of personal relationships between enslaved men and women and their particular gendered identities. Moreover, it also established the idea that enslaved men and women operated from a gender ideology structured around specific white ideas regarding the nature of masculine and feminine behaviour. This represented a further rejection of the blurring of enslaved gender identities, as illustrated in the hard physical labour that both enslaved men and women were expected to perform in the fields of the plantations.

Although enslaved women were defined as sexually promiscuous by wider white society, several examples in the WPA narratives point to the contrary, revealing instead their modest behaviour in the courting relationship. The previous chapter cited examples of women such as Lucy Ann Dunn and Laura Bell. These women established courting relationships in the immediate aftermath of emancipation, which were governed by certain moral codes that prevented either of them acting on their sexual desire until after they were married. Laura Bell, for example, would not let Thomas kiss her until

⁴⁴ Laura Bell, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 101. (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

they were married. Jim waited a year before he asked Lucy Ann to marry him and even after such a length of time she recalled ‘He aint kissed me yet...’⁴⁶

Similarly, Barbara Haywood recalled in her narrative that although she had known Frank since she was a child, when they were both enslaved in Wake County, she was far too shy to communicate her feelings to him and she was forced to wait for Frank to initiate their relationship. She recalled that after the Civil War, she and her family moved to Raleigh, where, she explained, she was able to see Frank most days, ‘I went ter school a little at Saint Paul’s. Frank was wurkin’ at de City Market on Fayetteville Street an’ I’d go seberal blocks out of my way mornin’ an’ night on my way ter school ter look at him. You see I has been in love with him fer a long time den.’⁴⁷ It is possible to deduce from Barbara’s behaviour that she had not wanted to be too forward in her approach to Frank. In many ways, Barbara appeared to be acting upon a notion of feminine respectability and honour that dictated that she should wait for Frank to approach her, rather than declare her own feelings first. Frank finally did make the first move, as Barbara explained, ‘I is thirteen so he comes ter see me an’ fer a year we co’uts.’⁴⁸

The behaviour of women such as Barbara belied the myths that had emerged out of the slave-owning South regarding enslaved women’s sexual appetite and their promiscuity, as discussed in Chapter Two. Whilst these examples are taken from the post-emancipation period it is evident that these women and their parents carried a moral framework into freedom that stressed female respectability and which was cultivated during enslavement. It is possible to argue then that in the arena of courtship enslaved women did not conform to dominant white ideas concerning their sexual nature. In fact,

⁴⁶ Lucy Ann Dunn, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 282.

⁴⁷ Barbara Haywood, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 387.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 388.

courtship might have allowed for enslaved women to resist those definitions through behaviour that could be characterised as coy and tentative, rather than as sexually assertive.

It is also possible to suggest that Frank Haywood had purposefully waited until Barbara was a certain age before he initiated their courtship, therefore revealing his own code of masculine morality. The images that emerge in these narratives thus directly contrast with white representations of enslaved men as sexually threatening and governed by their libido. For example, when Lily Perry discussed Robert's marriage proposal to her, shortly after emancipation, she emphasised his humility and modesty. Lily explained that 'We wus at a frolic at Louisburg when he proposes ter me an' he do hit dis way, Honey gal, I knows dat you doan love me so powerful much, but will you try ter do it fer me?' In response to his proposal she declared ' 'Go long, nigger, iffen I doan love yo' den dar ain't no water in Tar riber.'⁴⁹ Similarly, Frank's proposal to Barbara Haywood was characterised by a sense of shyness and reticence. She recalled that 'We wus sittin' in de kitchen at de house on Davis Street when he axes me ter have him an' I has him. *I knows dat he tol' me dat he warn't worthy but dat he loved me an' dat he'd do anything he could ter please me, an' dat he'd always be good ter me.*'⁵⁰ Far removed from white images of the sexually menacing and aggressive black male, the enslaved men in these narratives were defined as both unassuming and modest in the context of a relationship that was intimately connected to sexual desire.

Enslaved ideas about appropriate standards of morality were probably shaped by numerous factors, especially their religious beliefs – Christian and otherwise.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Lily Perry, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 165-166.

⁵⁰ Barbara Haywood interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 388. (emphasis added).

⁵¹ For a discussion of enslaved religion and the significance of Christianity in the lives of the enslaved see Sylvia Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1991); Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and the Caribbean*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

Courtship provided a social space within which the enslaved could conform to an ideal gendered code of conduct and adhere to certain standards of morality. It also allowed enslaved men and women to resist dominant white ideas regarding their gendered identities. Courting relationships allowed for the enslaved to reject representations of enslaved women as defeminised units of labour, or those of enslaved men that characterised them as lacking in masculine attributes because of the lack of autonomy and authority that they could claim over their own family. The alternative gendered definitions that were cultivated by the enslaved in the realm of courtship should be understood as a specific act of resistance, despite its limitations in terms of its effects on the wider system of slavery in the American South. Within the space that courtship provided the enslaved were able to reject and redefine ideas concerning their sexual identity and the gendered dimensions of enslaved life. Such action challenged the authority of the slave-owner in the emotional lives of the enslaved and also contested widely held assumptions regarding the gendered identity of the enslaved in the American South.

6.5: Extreme Resistance: Murdering the Master

As well as these indirect challenges to the ultimate control of the slave-owner, the enslaved occasionally engaged in overt acts of resistance in the context of love and courtship, usually as the result of the actions of a particularly brutal slave-owner. The murder of one's master in order to preserve familial and intimate ties is recounted in a limited selection of the North Carolina narratives. Killing the slave-owner represented one of the most radical and direct means of resistance taken by the enslaved in the antebellum South and this action certainly did not characterise the typical behaviour of enslaved men and women attempting to preserve their courtship and familial relationships. These infrequent and overt acts of resistance contrasted with more common and implicit responses, such as escaping the patrol gangs. This range of reactions to the control of the slave-owner over the emotional lives of the enslaved

reflected the diverse experiences of the slave system and the extremes of resistance that the enslaved were occasionally forced to employ.

Killing one's master in the name of love seems to have been as good a reason as any for some amongst the enslaved in the American South.⁵² In Washington County the Pettigrew Family papers document the murder of a local man, William Davenport, which provoked a range of responses amongst the inhabitants. Davenport was reportedly shot in February 1858 by three of his slaves. Gauzey, the enslaved man who was eventually incriminated for Davenport's murder, was allegedly frustrated with William Davenport because, '...his master would not allow him to have a wife off and said he must "fix things so that he could come and go".'⁵³ Gauzey's actions were then motivated by Davenport's control and interference in the emotional aspects of his life.

Local whites reacted to the murder of Davenport with indignation, shock and fear. For the enslaved to act in such a confrontational and assertive manner illustrated not only the possibilities for violent resistance from amongst the growing numbers of the enslaved in the state, but also served to expose the lie that the white slave-owning male was in all ways master and masterful. Writing from one of the Pettigrew plantations on Lake Scuppernong, Jane North reported to her sister that the incident was '...the first murder of this description ever known in this county & fills everybody with horror.'⁵⁴ The *horror* Jane North described was not aimed at Davenport's disregard of the

⁵² For an example of an enslaved woman killing her master in order to maintain an intimate relationship outside of the state of North Carolina see Melton McLaurin, *Celia: A Slave*, (New York, Avon Books, 1991).

⁵³ 11 February 1858, from Hardy Hardison to William Pettigrew, Pettigrew Family Papers, 1685, 1776–ca.1939, box 10, fol. 209, Feb 1858, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*. Note that in Hardy Hardison's letter to William Pettigrew he calls the slave in question "Ganzy" whilst the judicial records referred to "Gauzey". We may probably account for this in terms of Hardy Hardison's misunderstanding of the name in question. For further reference see Helen Catterall, [ed.], *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro, Volume II, Cases from the Courts of North Carolina, South Carolina & Tennessee*, (New York, Octagon Books, 1968), 215.

⁵⁴ 14 February 1858, from Jane Caroline (Carey) North to "Louise", Pettigrew Family Papers, 1685, 1776–ca.1939, box 10, fol. 209, Feb 1858, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*.

emotional needs of the enslaved, but the fact that Gauzey's actions had confirmed the worst fears of the local slave-owning population: that the enslaved were a potentially threatening and dangerous force.

The two other enslaved men involved in the incident, George and Aaron were reported as saying that Davenport had been 'hard with them and they must get rid of him...' ⁵⁵ Davenport was not considered by these slaves at least as a good master. It was Davenport's ultimate control over Gauzey's emotional destiny that had moved the enslaved man towards such intense measures. It was allegedly Davenport's hard attitude that had encouraged George and Aaron to involve themselves in the crime. The resentment towards slave-owners such as Davenport and their exercise of power over the physical and emotional will of the enslaved could then result in violent consequences.

Similar tales of cruel slave-owners meeting a sudden end at the hands of the enslaved appear elsewhere in the source material. For example, Dave Lawson related the story of his grandparents in his WPA interview, told to him by his father some years before. Drew Norwood purchased Cleve and Lissa Lawson just before the outbreak of the Civil War. Although the young couple had a child, Norwood refused to buy the baby as well remarking that 'a nigger brat wuzn' no good, dey wouldn' sell an' dey might die befo' dey growed up, 'sides dey was a strain on de mammy what breas' nussed it.' ⁵⁶ Despite Lissa's distress at being forced to leave her child behind Drew Norwood failed to comprehend the ties that bound this young family. Dave Lawson remarked that 'Marse Drew jus' laughed an' tole her dat he would give her a puppy; dat dey was plenty of houn's on de plantation...' ⁵⁷

⁵⁵ 11 February 1858, from Hardy Hardison, to William Pettigrew, Pettigrew Family Papers, 1685, 1776-ca.1939, box 10, fol. 209, Feb 1858, *Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

⁵⁶ Dave Lawson, interviewed for the WPA narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 46.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Norwood's failure to understand and respect the ties that bound enslaved couples such as Cleve and Lissa were to be his ultimate downfall. Aware that Norwood was intent on selling Lissa, Cleve was determined to maintain his relationship at any cost. Dave Lawson recalled that:

'Cleve watched Marse Drew on de sly. He seed him watchin' Lissa. He seed de lustful look in his eyes, but 'twuzn' Lissa he lustin' after; 'twuz money he seed in her slender swayin' body, in de smooth warm brown skin, an' de quick, clean way she gleam de wheat...Cleve 'gun to sweat. He turned so sick an' skeered dat he could hardly swing de scythe through de wheat. Marse Drew done took his baby away, an' now sumpin' way down in his heart tole him dat he was gwine take Lissa...' ⁵⁸

The image presented then is of a cruel and callous master who held no regard for the intimate relationships between the enslaved. Cleve's motivation in murdering Drew Norwood were founded on the strength of his love for Lissa and the fear that Norwood would separate the two forever. Cleve and Lissa's reaction was that of a desperate couple driven by the desire to reclaim a sense of control over the significant relationships in their life. Thus, Dave Lawson explained that:

When 'twuz good an' dark Cleve took a long rope an' went out tellin' Lissa to keep de water boilin'. When he come back he had Marse Drew all tied up wid de rope an' gagged so he couldn' holler; he had him th'owed over his shoulder like a sack of meal. He brung him in de cabin an' laid him on de floor, *den he tole him if he wouldn' sell Lissa dat he wouldn' hurt him.* But Marse Drew shook his head an' cussed in his th'oat. Den Cleve took off de gag, but befo' de white man could holler out, Cleve stuffed de spout of a funnel in his big mouf way down his th'oat, holdin' down his tounge. *He ax him one more time to save Lissa from de block, but Marse Drew look*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 47.

*at him wid hate in his eyes shook his head again. Cleve didn' say nothin' else to him; he call Lissa an' tole her to bring him a pitcher of boilin' water.*⁵⁹

The murder of Drew Norwood illustrates the extreme measures that an enslaved couple were sometimes forced to employ in order to remain together. The severity of their resistance served to emphasise the depth of feeling between them and the lengths they were willing to go in order to maintain their relationship. Respectively, Gauzey, Cleve and Lissa paid for their desire to be with the one they loved. Whilst we do not know the actual fate of Gauzey, it is evident that he was indicted for the murder of Davenport. We can assume that he was punished in a similar manner to that of Cleve and Lissa Lawson:

After dat Lissa an' Cleve sat down to wait for de sheriff. Dey knew 'twuzn' no use to run, dey couldn' get nowhare. 'Bout sunup de folks came an' foun' Marse Drew, an' dey foun' Lissa an' Cleve sittin' by de door han' in han' waitin'. When dem niggers tole what dey done an' how come dey done it dem white folks was hard. De sheriff took de rope from 'roun' Marse Drew an' cut it into two pieces. He tied one rope roun' Cleve's neck an' one rope 'roun' Lissa's neck an' hung dem up in de big oak tree in de yard.⁶⁰

Overt acts of resistance struck at the heart of southern white society and punishment was usually swift and particularly brutal. In their resistance against Drew Norwood's authority over their emotional lives, Cleve and Lissa Lawson had paid a heavy price. Yet, in a bizarre twist of the power relations that structured enslaved life in

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 49. (emphasis added).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 50.

the antebellum South Cleve and Lissa had managed to defy the ultimate control exercised by the slave-owner, for they were not separated, not even in death, as Dave Lawson recounted:

‘Sometimes now in de fall of de year when I’s settin’ in de door after de sun done gone down; an’ de wheat am ripe an’ bendin’ in de win’, an’ de moon am roun’ an yeller like a mush melon, seems like I sees two shadows swingin’ from de big lim’ of dat tree – I sees dem swingin’ low side by side wid dey feets near ‘bout touchin’ de grou’.’⁶¹

In the act of killing one’s master, enslaved individuals such as Cleve and Lissa, expressed the most desperate, yet defiant challenge to the assumed ownership of the body, mind and soul of the enslaved.

Of course Dave Lawson’s account of Cleve and Lissa may not have been entirely true and was almost certainly influenced by his own talents as a storyteller. His narrative provides no date for these events, nor the specific County in which they took place, although he does mention that Norwood lived near the Virginia line, ‘ ‘tween Red Bank and Blue Wing’. He owned lan’ ‘cross de No’t h Carolina line too an’ lived close to Blue Wing.’⁶² We do know that Cleve and Lissa were his grandparents and this therefore suggests that this crime had occurred in the early antebellum period, or at an even earlier date. It would be possible to check the legal records for North Carolina during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in order to verify whether this crime was ever recorded. Alternatively, archival material could be searched for the existence of Drew Norwood and Lissa and Cleve, in order to try and track their life histories.⁶³

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.* 45

⁶³ Unfortunately, I read this narrative after my research visit to North Carolina and thus my access to archival records, in order to search for the existence of Drew Norwood and his slaves, was particularly limited. I have used Catterall, *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery*, to check for the legal records relating to the case but was unable to find any such evidence.

However, whilst we may question the reliability of Dave Lawson's account, its real value lies in the meanings that such a tale may have conveyed to the enslaved. Whether it was an authentic reflection of events was not the point of the story. Instead the tale was intended to underline the strength and intensity of the ties that bound enslaved couples together and the brutalities of the slave system that attempted to drive them apart. The image described by Dave Lawson of the ghosts of Cleve and Lissa, hanging from the limb of the tree, served to provide a haunting and persistent reminder for the formerly enslaved and white society during the 1930s, that the enslaved had been capable of creating and sustaining relationships that were based upon deep and lasting feelings of love. It was in fact the system of slavery that denied and sought to destroy these unions. Much like Alonzo Haywood's evaluation of his parent's relationship, cited in the Introduction to this thesis, Dave Lawson's account of Lissa and Cleve, whether entirely true or not, suggests that there was an enduring belief amongst the formerly enslaved in the strength and sincerity of love between enslaved couples. In the narrative of Dave Lawson, Cleve and Lissa's love was so strong that it had held them together in death, as it had done in life. This story therefore further reinforced the notion that enslaved love was certainly nothing to laugh about.

It is evident from the material presented in this chapter that courtship represented a significant arena of struggle within which the enslaved were able to contest and confront the forces that regulated and shaped their lives. Such resistance took several forms and ranged from daily covert activities, such as threading grapevines across the road to evade the patrol gangs, to more serious actions, such as the murder of the master. Courtship was thus considered by the enslaved as a fundamental right to which they were entitled. As the next chapter will illustrate questions of courtship and the dynamics of the courting relationship came to occupy an important position within the cultural world of the enslaved. The enslaved did not seek to merely participate in courtship practices, but also created means through which they were able to explore and understand the values and ideals that structured these intimate relationships.

Chapter Seven

Brer Rabbit Goes a Courtin' – Folklore and Courtship of the Enslaved

7.1: Retelling Tales – The Meaning and Significance of Folklore Stories

The previous chapter focussed upon elements of resistance that were embedded in the processes of courtship for the enslaved. It suggested that the enslaved strove to create and define their courtships on their own terms, and they consequently challenged the slave-owner's role in their emotional affairs. Thus the enslaved were able to attain a degree of emotional autonomy within their courting relationships. The idea that their courtships were in some ways removed from the ultimate authority of the slave-owner was further underlined in the folklore tales of the enslaved. These stories were a significant element in the cultural world of the enslaved. They thus represented another example of a semi-autonomous social space within which the enslaved were able to explore and clarify their own questions and dilemmas regarding the processes of courtship.

Folklore stories of the enslaved were usually set in the animal kingdom, and typically revolved around the trickster character, a cunning and resourceful creature who usually triumphed over his adversaries through the use of charm and wit, trickery and deceit. These tales were to be found across the slave-holding states of the American South, even in the less densely settled areas of places such as North Carolina.¹ Common stories were related with different characters, perhaps Brer Fox supplanting Brer Wolf or the Terrapin outwitting the Deer rather than the Rabbit. However, the basic themes of wit over brute force, cunning and cleverness over rash thoughtlessness and the overwhelming victories of the trickster character in contests of the heart or the harvest were reiterated across the North American mainland from the colonial period onwards.

¹ See for example Backus, "Animal Tales From North Carolina"; Devereux, *Plantation Sketches*; Parsons, "Tales From Guilford County".

These stories served to establish important points of continuity with enslaved people's African past and thus represent an example of the ways in which the enslaved appropriated aspects of their African heritage in the context of enslavement. However, I am not concerned in this chapter with presenting the arguments surrounding the origins of enslaved folklore. Such arguments have tended to dominate previous analysis and have subsequently overshadowed the wider meanings of these tales. Lawrence Levine, however, has argued that 'cultural continuities with Africa were not dependent upon importation and perpetuation of specific folk tales in their pristine form. It was in the place that tales occupied in the lives of slaves, the meaning slaves derived from them, and the ways in which slaves used them culturally and physically that the clearest resemblance with their African past could be found.'² Considering the folklore tales of the enslaved in this manner centralises the meaning of the tale, and points to their significance in the wider life experiences of the enslaved.

The tales may well have had their roots in the oral cultures of the West African coast where storytelling was defined as an art form and the folklore stories that were told revealed much regarding the values, morals and ideas of the people who inhabited this area. Like the folklore of the enslaved many of the African tales were set within the animal kingdom and the trickster character figured largely in these stories.³ The tales I shall be

² Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness – Afro American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, (Oxford, London, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977), 82.

³ For a further discussion of African Folklore see, Elphinstone Dayrell, *Folk Stories From Southern Nigeria, West Africa*, (London, New York, Bombay, Calcutta, Longmans Green and Co, 1910); Robert. H. Nassau, *Where Animals Talk – West African Folklore Tales*, (Boston, Mass, Fairseas Press, 1912); R.S, Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folktales*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1930); Alta Jablow, *An Anthology of West African Folklore with an Introduction by Paul Goodman*, (Thames & Hudson, 1961).

using in the course of this chapter have been taken from the *Uncle Remus* Collection edited by Joel Chandler Harris, in which the primary trickster character was that of Brer Rabbit.⁴

Story telling had long been used by the enslaved as a means to explore the experiences that shaped their world. Several historians have considered the folklore tale as a significant feature of enslaved life, which illustrates the depth and creativity of their culture. John Blassingame has argued that enslaved folklore provides proof that the rigors of slavery did not destroy vital creative aspects of the cultural world of the enslaved.⁵ Moreover, he also claimed that these tales were generally related by older enslaved men and women on the plantation, who were highly esteemed as teachers in the quarters of the enslaved, and guided younger members of the enslaved community through lessons of morality via stories, riddles, proverbs and folktales.

Blassingame also noted the intimate connection between these tales and the processes of courtship and marriage by suggesting that one of the ways in which the enslaved could be successful in the arenas of sex, courtship and marriage was to be skilled in the 'verbal arts'. Blassingame argued that courtship on the plantation was a battle of wits played by resort to riddle, poetic boasting, toasts and ridicule.⁶ However, historians have largely failed to consider the structure and content of those tales relating to courtship. The significance of the courtship contest embedded in several of the stories has generally been overlooked in favour of assessing the function of folklore in the wider cultural world of the enslaved. Nevertheless, numerous folklore tales revolved around the trickster's attempts to court a particular woman, and the means he employed to outwit his rivals. These stories

⁴ Within this chapter I will be using stories from four of the books from the series. See Harris, *Uncle Remus*, (1880); *Nights with Uncle Remus*, (1883); *Daddy Jake the Runaway*, (1889); *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, (1893). For a further discussion of the *Uncle Remus* collection as an historical source see Chapter One.

⁵ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, Chapter Two, "Culture."

⁶ Blassingame, "Status and Social Structure in the Slave Community", 143-45.

represent an important means by which the enslaved community were able to explore their understandings of the courting relationship and elucidate their ideas concerning love. Furthermore they helped to create a space within which the enslaved could establish particular ideals or voice certain concerns regarding the processes of courtship and the problems and dilemmas that might be faced in such experiences.⁷

Many of these tales demonstrated a preoccupation with elements of the courtship process, although the actual relationship between the courting couple was rarely emphasised. What does form the fundamental theme of many of the tales were those factors that might have impacted on the success (or otherwise) of a courtship. As the previous chapter has established, enslaved men and women were able to adopt particular gendered identities in a courting relationship. In several of the folklore stories the trickster character possessed particular gendered characteristics, such as charisma, charm and wit. The trickster in the tale relied upon these attributes in order to achieve success in affairs of the heart.

In contrast, female characters, who occupied a central position in a minority of the tales, usually displayed gendered characteristics that were represented as undesirable feminine qualities. Females who were represented as foolish, vain, naïve or proud would usually be tricked or punished because of these specific traits. Moreover, in certain tales, females occupied a role that was especially malevolent. In these tales her malicious intentions were played out in the context of courtship. The male of the story was usually saved from her wicked plans after seeking the advice or help of a respected member of the community, and keeping his wits about him. Such tales acted as a warning to young men to proceed with caution where women and love were concerned.

The focus of several of the tales was upon the external relationships that were significant in structuring the progress of a courtship. Such stories typically involved two

⁷ As Chapter One has already noted these particular tales were narrated in a male voice and were largely intended for a male audience.

male suitors competing with each other for the heart of a certain woman. At the centre of these tales was the challenge between the two competitors, and the means through which one of them emerged victorious. The courting relationship was the prize they sought; yet the fundamental aspect of these narratives was the means by which they achieved success. The contest was typically established by a father, with the hand of his daughter as the prize. In locating the figure of the father in the position of rule maker these stories reflected the fact that there were powerful influences defining the shape of a courtship. The folklore tales were removed from the realities of enslavement and thus within the stories the slave-owner's authority was supplanted by that of the father. Nevertheless the tales indicated that courtship was a process in which the male head of the household, whether it was the father in the folklore tale or the slave-owner in reality, possessed a large degree of control and authority.

Within the stories the course of true love was usually subject to external factors, such as contest and competition or trickery and magic. In the folklore tales love often fell victim to trickery and deceit. Magic appeared in a number of the tales as a fundamental device, through which the trickster character managed to capture the attentions of his intended. This aspect of the folklore tales both reflected and reinforced an important element of enslaved culture. Magic was often employed by the enslaved in order to attract a particular person or ward off any serious competitors for their attention. Some of the stories contained in the folklore of the enslaved reflected certain aspects of their lives. In this way these stories not only served to create a space within which aspects of the courting process could be explored but they also confirmed and celebrated those elements that were already an important part of the courtship experience for the enslaved.

7.2: Who was Brer Rabbit? The Riddle of the Folklore Tale

It is often difficult to decipher who the trickster character represented in these tales. Was the trickster intended to represent the enslaved, located in a world where the weak and the powerless attained their ends through native wit? Or, was the trickster a parody of the white master, a cheating and malicious character who won not through fair play or hard work, but through cheating, deceit and the betrayal of friendships?

Joel Chandler Harris believed that it required little investigation to explain why the enslaved selected Brer Rabbit, the weakest and harmless of all animals, as the victor in contests against Brer Wolf, Brer Fox and Brer Bear.⁸ Harris understood Brer Rabbit's triumphs in the folklore tale as an example of wish fulfilment on the part of the enslaved. The trickster's success, based on his wit and malicious cunning, inverted the hierarchy of the animal kingdom, and suggested that it was possible for the weak and powerless to emerge victorious. The significance of these messages for the enslaved in the American South need hardly be explained. As Lawrence Levine has argued, 'Brer Rabbit's victories became the victories of the slave...The trickster's exploits, which overturned the neat hierarchy of the world in which he was forced to live, became their exploits; the justice he achieved, their justice; the strategies he employed, their strategies. From his adventures they obtained relief; from his triumphs they learned hope.'⁹

The character of the trickster can be found in several of the narratives of formerly enslaved men and women. This suggests that the enslaved were able to identify with the central trickster character of the folklore tale, and consequently, he served as a model on which they might have styled themselves. For example, Leon Berry recounted a tale about a

⁸ See Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, xiv.

⁹ Lawrence Levine, "Some Go Up and Some Go Down: The Meaning of the Slave Trickster", in Lawrence Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History*, (New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993), 71.

typical trickster, related to him by his father, Hugh Berry, who was enslaved in Long Creek.

He recalled,

...my daddy said, there was another fella, yeah, in slavery time. He make like he was sick, groanin' all the time and er, well, the marster come down in the mornin' and say, he say, "Jim, Jim, what could you eat?" He said, "Well boss, I dunno what I can eat." He said, "Well, could you eat two slices of ham 'n egg?" "Well boss, I could eat that alright" So the boss would bring him that down an' sat aroun' an' he eat that up, and er, he made some of the other fellas sort of mad at him and er they betrayed him. He says...they says, "Marse, say, you go down to Jim's house in the mornin' after breakfast, and you'll find him sittin' up there playin' the fiddle." "Oh, I don't believe Jim be like that!" "Yeah, he is, say you watch him – go down after he eat breakfast and you'll see him." So he went down there that mornin' ole marse, walk down there, say Jim was sittin' up in the chair playin' the fiddle,

"Hello, fool ole marster seven years, I'm gonna fool 'im seven more."

Then marster opened the door, Jim fell over the floor dead! An' they had to pick 'im up and shake 'im alive again, get 'im up and said, "Jim." marster didn't do nothin' to him but from then on Jim took the lead role till slavery was over – how about that!¹⁰

Jim could be characterised in the above tale as the "Brer Rabbit" of the story, a cunning trickster, who had succeeded in fooling the master for seven years. We may also recall the tale of Uncle Jim, discussed in Chapter Five who crossed the river at night in order

¹⁰ Interview with Leon Berry, African-American basket maker from Long Creek, North Carolina, from the Glenn Hinson Collection, *Southern Folklore Collection*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

to see his girl, outwitting the patrollers in order to pursue his courtship. After narrowly escaping capture, Uncle Jim crowed gleefully to the patrol gang, “Yeah Hinskies, come and get me!...How Lord, I’ll be back one night next week, but you won’t catch me!”¹¹ Uncle Jim’s story illustrates one of the ways in which the trickster character was applauded in the narratives of formerly enslaved men and women and further supports the idea that the enslaved identified with Brer Rabbit’s characteristics and behaviour.

However, the complete identification of the enslaved with the trickster character is somewhat problematic. Lawrence Levine has suggested that ‘The problem with the notion that slaves completely identified with their animal trickster hero whose exploits were really protest tales in disguise is that it ignores much of the complexity and ambiguity inherent in these tales.’¹² Brer Rabbit’s methods to achieve success were often brutal and deceitful, and representations of the trickster character were fraught with contradiction. There is a tension that exists in the tales then concerning the question of whether we should accept and celebrate the actions of Brer Rabbit or if he should instead be treated with suspicion and caution.

Friendship, for example, was not highly valued in the tales. Brer Rabbit did not just outsmart the likes of Brer Fox, but also, as in the story of the corn shucking contest discussed below, he tricked and deceived those animals who were similar to him in terms of physical strength, such as Brer Coon. There seems to have been little moral structure to Brer Rabbit’s world. Furthermore, the trickster character himself was tricked in certain tales, usually by those who rank alongside him in the hierarchy of the folklore animal kingdom, such as Brer Terrapin.¹³ A similar ambiguity can be detected in representations of the

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Levine, “Some Go Up...”, 71.

¹³ For an example of this see Harris, “Mr. Rabbit Finds his Match at Last”, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, 80-84.

trickster in the narratives of formerly enslaved men and women. In the narrative discussed above of the enslaved trickster Jim, his behaviour was granted a sly smile by the audience, yet in the tale his actions were condemned by his fellow slaves, who eventually informed the master of his antics because they were tired of him shirking the work load. By the end of the narrative, Jim the trickster had been reformed, and instead he adopted the mantle of worker. Thus, representations of the trickster in the narratives and folklore of the enslaved are ambiguous. The trickster's characteristics were both celebrated and deplored, his methods applauded yet appalling.

Levine argued that if we relax the idea that the trickster and slave are necessarily one, then important levels of understanding are revealed. He claimed that the tales might be understood as a parody of white society, in which the trickster character represented the manipulative and oppressive slave-owner, who achieved their ends through violence, cruelty and injustice.¹⁴ It is important therefore, not to over-stress the identification of the enslaved with the character of the trickster in order to further expand our understanding of these tales. However, the idea that these stories were enslaved perceptions of the world of the slave-owning elite should be treated with caution. Whilst Brer Rabbit's actions were often defined as wicked and malicious, his overall character and constant triumphs were celebrated in the stories. If the chief trickster of the tale represented the slave-owner, and the constant battle between members of the folklore animal kingdom merely represented the world of the slave-owning elite, it would be highly unlikely that the trickster character would be characterised as possessing any positive attributes at all.

Instead, the folklore tales should be understood as partially reflecting aspects of the world of the enslaved. The trickster can be located within this world, where he represented a particular character that was both approved of and maligned. Brer Rabbit's ingenuity and

¹⁴ Levine, "Some Go Up...", 75-76.

cunning usually meant he was able to outsmart the strong and powerful who threatened him. Thus, as this chapter will discuss at greater length, the trickster character was celebrated as an alternative identity that enslaved men might have sought to emulate. His behaviour appeared to guarantee success in the arena of courtship and love. Yet, the tales also served as cautionary warnings to their audience. They narrated episodes of survival and success in important areas of enslaved men's life, such as in contests over food and women. The methods of the trickster were exposed as underhand and devious, and thus the tales also functioned so that enslaved men might understand the possible nature of their competitors in the arena of courtship.

7.3: '...Courtin' en sparklin' 'roun' de naberhood mo' somer dan folk.'¹⁵: Folklore as a Reflection of Enslaved Social Life

Many of the folklore tales did then reflect aspects of enslaved life. This could often be seen in the characteristics the animals possessed, their behaviour or the social setting of a particular story. In many of the tales we find Brer Rabbit 'smokin' his seegyar' or 'cheewin' his terbacker.' The animals frequently indulged in frolics, candy pullings and dances, where much male rivalry over women and food occurred. In the story of *How Mr Rooster Lost his Dinner* the birds on the plantation decided to throw a party '...Dey was mighty sociable in dem days, en it tu'n out dat de fowls on one plan'ation gin a party w'ich dey sont out der invites ter de fowls on de 't'er plan'ation.'¹⁶ As already illustrated in Chapter Five events such as frolics were an essential means by which the enslaved could establish and maintain ties with each other, especially when they lived on different plantations. Yet such occasions were authorised and organised by the slave-owner and thus represent examples of licensed

¹⁵ Harris, "How Mr. Rabbit Succeeded in Raising a Dust", *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings*, 127-131, 127.

¹⁶ Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus*, 56-61, 59.

leisure time for the enslaved. In contrast, the spectre of the slave-owner was removed in the tales and thus the social events staged by the animals of the folklore kingdom were not subject to the same measures of control and regulation. Although these tales were located in social settings that the enslaved were able to comprehend they were also removed in certain ways from the realities of enslavement.

Certain themes and images in several of the tales echoed aspects of the social world of the enslaved. For example, music and dancing were essential elements for a frolic and in the folklore stories specific members of the animal neighbourhood were called upon at such events to demonstrate their abilities on the quills, the fiddle and the dance floor. In the tale of *Mr Benjamin Ram and His Wonderful Fiddle*, Benjamin Ram was described as ‘...one ‘er deze yer ole’ timers...he sech a handy man fer ter have at a frolic dat de yuther creeturs like ‘im mighty well, en w’en dey tucka notion fer ter shake der foot, w’ich de notion tuck’n’ struck ‘um eve’y once in a w’ile, nuthin’ ‘ud do but dey mus’ sen’ fer ole’ man Benjamin Ram en his fiddle.’¹⁷ Playing the fiddle had earned Benjamin Ram respect from the other creatures in the animal kingdom. The fiddler who played at the dances organised by the enslaved were also accorded similar admiration. As Chapter Five has already established, the fiddler was one of the central figures at the social gatherings of the enslaved and several of the WPA narratives referred to the skills of the musician at a local frolic.

Musical ability and rhythm were often necessary skills needed by the male characters in the courtship scenarios of the folklore stories. In a contest between Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit over King Deer’s daughter, Brer Rabbit tricked Brer Fox into admitting to King Deer that he had been killing his goats. Through this admission Brer Fox lost favour with King Deer, and Brer Rabbit triumphed in the contest. This dreadful act of trickery was performed through a song:

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 44.

Dey play a chune er two on de quills en tr'angle, en den dey got ter de song.

Ole Brer Rabbit, he got de call, en he open up lak dis:

Some folks pile up m'on dey kin tote,

En dat w'at de marter wid King Deer goat,

En den Brer Fox, he make answer:

Dat's so, dat's so, en I'm glad dat it's so!

Den de quills en de tr'angle dey come in, en den Brer Rabbit pursue on wid de call:

Some kill sheep en some kill shote,

But Brer Fox kill King Deer goat.

En den Brer Fox, he jine in wid de answer:

*I did, dat I did, en I'm glad dat I did!*¹⁸

Through his leadership of the song Brer Rabbit managed to position himself as the caller, thus shaping the response of Brer Fox. It was through his mastery of rhythm that Brer Rabbit was able to trick Brer Fox and win the contest for King Deer's daughter. The themes of musical and rhythmic abilities can be translated into reality at the numerous social gatherings of the enslaved where dancing and musical rhythm were central components of the nights activities. Social events where courting was a significant feature, such as the frolic, were used to set the stage in the folklore tales for a contest to unfold.

These stories reflected aspects of the environments in which the enslaved socialised and hence they provide a space for exploring the nature of courtship. Romantic relationships were woven into the fabric of the lives of the creatures in the tales. They offered a meaning for events that occurred and explained why the animals competed with each other and in what context such rivalry developed. Through a consideration of these tales it is possible to

¹⁸ "Brother Fox, Brother Rabbit and King Deer's Daughter", *Ibid.* 68-74, 73-74. (emphasis in original).

understand how the enslaved experienced and explored the complicated processes of courtship and the questions and dilemmas that structured these relationships.

7.4: Brer Rabbit and the Contest of Courtship

Brer Rabbit dancing and singing plum turned Miss Wolf's head so Miss Wolf she say "it most surely are Brer Rabbits pile"...Brer Rabbit he take the gal and go off...poor old Brer Coon he take hisself off home, he so tired, he can scarcely hold hisself together.¹⁹

Often, as in the story from which the above quote is taken, Brer Rabbit was forced to compete with another animal for the attentions of a particular female of the animal kingdom. In this tale, Brer Wolf offered his attractive daughter to the animal who could shuck the most corn. As Chapter Five has already discussed a corn shucking was a significant event in the lives of the enslaved as a "licensed" opportunity for socialising and courtship. Brer Rabbit had his heart set on winning the hand of Miss Wolf, yet he knew he was unable to compete with Brer Coon at shucking corn. Rather than spending his time trying to contend with Brer Coon, Brer Rabbit sang, danced and charmed Miss Wolf while the others were engaged in the corn shucking contest. At the end of the contest, Brer Rabbit declared himself the winner, and a confused Brer Wolf left the decision to his daughter. Following Brer Rabbit's attempts at wooing Miss Wolf she could not fail to have been impressed and this explains why Miss Wolf declared, 'it most surely are Brer Rabbits pile.'

At the heart of this fable was the issue of male rivalry between Brer Rabbit and Brer Coon. The two characters possessed very different skills. Brer Coon was known for his ability to work hard and shuck corn. He thus embodied the role of "provider", which as this

¹⁹ Tale originating from Georgia, cited in Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 111.

thesis has already discussed was considered as a role that enslaved men were keen to embrace in the context of courtship. In the animal folklore kingdom this attribute was also highly prized, as it ensured survival through the provision of food. In offering his daughter to the hardest worker Brer Wolf defined the demands that a father might place on a suitor for his daughter: someone who was willing to work hard to provide for her.

However, Brer Rabbit's character realised the futility of hard work, for it was not the provider that Miss Wolf sought, but the lover. Brer Rabbit was a charmer and it was this that took Miss Wolf's fancy. Moreover, Brer Rabbit's actions undermined the element of work that in reality the enslaved were enforced to incorporate into their pursuit of courting relationships at authorised social events such as corn shuckings. Unlike the enslaved men and women discussed in Chapter Five, who had been forced to include their experiences of courtship into these work-based events, Brer Rabbit rejected the labour demanded of him at the corn shucking and instead focussed his attentions on attracting the girl in question.

The story thus signified the fundamental ways in which authorised social events could be manipulated in order to integrate intimate aspects of enslaved life such as courtship. The folklore tale can be understood as part of the semi-autonomous social world of the enslaved, which competed with the slave-owner's claims to control their emotional lives. Within this tale, Brer Rabbit questioned and challenged this control and thus he was able to transcend the mechanisms of authority, which in reality were embedded in the slave system and illustrated in the courtship experiences of enslaved men and women.

Furthermore, the tale demonstrated that it was often wit and trickery rather than particular skills and ability that appealed to young woman. It served to provide a cautionary word to daughters to heed parental advice and judgement in matters of the heart. Miss Wolf had not necessarily chosen well in Brer Rabbit as a suitor. He was a trickster, who had charmed her affections, cheated in the contest, and might have failed to provide for her in the future. Some young women might have found the masculine traits of charm and

charisma attractive, and this was probably an influential factor in their choosing a suitable partner. Yet the story illustrated that it was perhaps wiser to select a beau on the basis of more practical and pragmatic considerations. In addition, the tale exposed the behaviour and actions of a trickster to enslaved men in order that they might be aware of the manners and motives of their competitors in the arena of courtship. In this story it was not only Brer Wolf who Brer Rabbit deceived, but also Brer Coon, a creature who perhaps shared Brer Rabbit's status in the animal folklore kingdom. The story communicated that it was necessary to be on one's guard against rivals who were willing to resort to dishonest methods in order to win a woman's affections.

In other tales Brer Rabbit employed his wit and trickery in order to win the direct approval of the authority figure. For example, in the tale of *Brer Rabbit and the Mosquitoes*, Brer Rabbit won the hand of Miss Wolf after visiting her home in the swamp. All the other animals who had taken to courting Miss Wolf had been escorted away by her father, Brer Wolf, after they had demonstrated their inability to live with the mosquitoes in the swamp,

Brer Fox, he went flyin' 'roun' Miss Wolf, en he sot dar, he did, en run on wid
'er en fight skeeters des es big ez life an twice -tez natchual. Las' Brer Wolf,
he tuck'n kotch Brer Fox slappin' an fightin' at he skeeters. Wid dat he tuck'n
tuck Brer Fox by de off year en led 'im out ter de front gate, en w'en he git dar,
he 'low, he did, dat no man w'at can't put up wid skeeters aint gwine ter come
a-courtin' his gal.²⁰

The story communicated the fact that certain requirements befell prospective suitors within the realm of courtship. Brer Wolf declared that no man should court his daughter if they could not adapt to the conditions in which she and her family lived. The most

²⁰ Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus*, 219-227, 221.

appropriate suitor for Miss Wolf then, was the man who would simply accept her and her family for what they were. This story thus presents another example of familial expectations and demands, defined by the father figure of the tale, and imposed on the courting experiences of his daughter and her beau.

Brer Rabbit visited the swamp in order to court Miss Wolf. He won Brer Wolf over by confiding in him that his own family did not derive from “good stock”. He told him that he had seen a spotted horse in the town that day and what was more he imparted, ‘Let ‘lone dat, Brer Wolf, my granddaddy wuz spotted...Hit’s de naked trufe I’m a ginin un you’²¹ In demonstrating where his grandfather’s spots were, Brer Rabbit strategically slapped away the mosquitoes that had landed on him during the course of the conversation, ‘Yasser! Des ez sho’ ez youer settin’ dar, my granddaddy wuz spotted. Spotted all over. (Skeeter come zoonin’ up and light on Brer Rabbit Jaw). He wuz dat. He had er great big spot right yer!.’²²

In proposing that his own family, like Brer Wolf’s, were not “quality folks”, and that this was nothing to be ashamed of, Brer Rabbit had taken Brer Wolf into his confidence, while simultaneously swatting away the mosquitoes. Brer Rabbit actively sought acceptance by Brer Wolf and in the process of doing so he communicated the importance of the father’s consent to the relationship of Brer Rabbit and Miss Wolf. Yet, again this consent was obtained through trickery and deceit. Brer Rabbit had not really become accustomed to the mosquitoes in the swamp but had slyly managed to slap them away without Brer Wolf realising.

In the WPA narratives the slave-owner emerges as the most powerful figure shaping the intimate relationships of the enslaved. It is then interesting that in the folklore tales the role of the father replaces that of the slave-owner. It is possible to suggest that by providing

²¹ *Ibid.* 225.

²² *Ibid.*

significant psychological space from the routines and regimes of the daily working lives of the enslaved these stories allowed for courtship to be defined beyond the boundaries of the slave system. While in many ways these tales reflected certain elements of enslaved life, they were simultaneously detached from the daily realities of enslavement and sought to situate courtships beyond the defined margins of the plantation. They communicated enslaved ideals and by replacing the role of the slave-owner with that of the father, these tales were in many ways removed from the regulation and control that governed the courtships of the enslaved.

Even though the father replaced the role of the slave-owner in the tales, it is possible to see how this authority was undermined through Brer Rabbit's actions. In reality, and as this thesis has already discussed in Chapter Five, enslaved men and women were usually required to gain the permission of their slave-owner before their relationship could proceed. In the folklore kingdom, the rule-maker was represented by the father, who established the limits to the courting relationship, and also demanded that any suitor won his approval before the courtship began. Yet, this consent was usually won in these folklore tales through trickery and deceit. The stories illustrated that there were powerful influences shaping the form of a courtship. However, Brer Rabbit challenged these influences through the underhand and devious methods he employed in order to win the approval of the rule-maker. The tales thus suggested an awareness of the factors that governed the courting relationship. Yet they also communicated a willingness to contest and disrupt such procedures.

7.5: The Dashing Trickster and the Wicked Woman

As Chapter Six has illustrated the enslaved were able to occupy particular gendered identities in the arena of courtship that resisted white stereotypes regarding the nature of these relationships. Certain roles occupied by the enslaved in the arena of courtship operated on particular gendered codes of conduct that were considered as desirable masculine or

feminine traits. The folklore tales also reflected ideas concerning gendered characteristics. Brer Rabbit embodied a distinct definition of masculinity. Yet, his traits of bravado and cunning seemed to represent the very opposite to the masculine roles of “provider” and “protector”, which were esteemed in the WPA narratives as those roles which enslaved men were able to embrace in the courting relationship. Brer Rabbit’s characteristics were celebrated in the tales as an alternative masculine identity that defied the image of enslaved men as powerless. Yet at the same time the tales and the character of Brer Rabbit operated as a warning to enslaved men to be aware of the trickster character and his dishonest methods. It was vital to know the trickster and his characteristics so that he could be outwitted.

Although one of the smallest and weakest of the animals in terms of strength, Brer Rabbit’s sharp wit and quick thinking usually served to make fools of those who attempted to challenge him. His cunning and deceitful nature can also be compared to the stupidity and naivety of characters such as Brer Fox, who featured in many of the tales as the creature Brer Rabbit got the better off. Brer Fox’s inability to outsmart Brer Rabbit usually resulted in his unfortunate downfall. In the story of how *Mr. Rabbit Grossly Deceives Mr Fox*, Brer Rabbit boasted to Miss Meadows that Brer Fox used to be the riding horse of Brer Rabbit’s daddy. When Brer Fox heard of such talk he decided to trick Brer Rabbit into going along with him to a party at Miss Meadows where Brer Rabbit would be forced to admit the truth:

Den Brer Rabbit say he was too sick, en Brer Fox say he wuzzent en dar dey had it up and down, ‘sputin’ en contendin’. Brer Rabbit say he can’t walk. Brer Fox say he tote ‘im. Brer Rabbit say how? Brer Fox say in his arms. Brer Rabbit say he drop ‘im. Brer Fox know he won’t. Brer Rabbit say he go ef Brer Fox tote ‘im on his back. Brer Fox say he would. Brer Rabbit say he can’t ride widout a saddle. Brer Fox say he git a saddle. Brer Rabbit say he can’t set in de saddle less he have a bridle fer ter hol by. Brer Fox say he git de bridle...Den

Brer Rabbit say he go. Brer Fox say he ride Brer Rabbit mos' up ter Mis' Meadows, en den he could git down en walk de balance er de way. Brer Rabbit 'greed...Co'se Brer Rabbit know de game dat Brer Fox was fixin' ter play, en he termin' fer ter outdo 'im, en by de time he koam his ha'r en twis' his mustarsh, en sorted rig up, yer come Brer Fox saddle en bridle on, en lookin' ez peart ez a circus pony...w'en dey got close to Miss Meadows...whar Brer Rabbit wuz to git off, en Brer Fox made a motion fer ter stan still, Brer Rabbit slap de spurrers inter Brer Fox flanks, en you better b'leeve he got over groun'...²³

Several versions of this story existed across the slave-holding states, typically involving Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox or Brer Wolf, and the tale recounted how Brer Rabbit made a riding horse of one of them²⁴. It was Brer Rabbit's charm and audacity which made him so appealing and attractive to the female characters in these tales. It would seem that Brer Fox was not sly or cunning enough to outwit his competitor and thus Brer Rabbit was nearly always cast in the tales as the victor of the contest. Although Brer Rabbit had grossly deceived Brer Fox, and tricked him into being his riding horse, Brer Rabbit's characteristics were still applauded as those which attracted Miss Meadows and the girls, and even resulted in them collaborating with him in his trickery '...En den Brer Rabbit sorter grin, he did, en de gals giggle, en Miss Meadows, she praise up de pony, en dar wuz Brer Fox hitch fas' ter

²³ Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, 34-39, 37.

²⁴ See Parsons, "Tales From Guilford County, North Carolina"; Elsie Clews Parsons, *Folklore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and New York, American Folklore Society, 1923).

de rack, en couldn't he'p hisse'f.'²⁵ In many ways then Brer Rabbit was defined as possessing particular attributes that were especially appealing to women.

He was frequently defined in such terms and was cast as the “dashing beau” in several of the tales that revolved around the courtship experience. Miss Wolf for example was highly excited when Brer Rabbit paid her a visit in the swamp, she exclaimed, ‘My goodness mammy! Dat's Mr. Rabbit, I year de gals say he's a mighty prop-en-tickler gentermun...’²⁶ This image of Brer Rabbit as a gentleman was complemented in the tale by Miss Wolf, who was cast as the embodiment of a specific form of femininity based upon characteristics such as passivity and reticence. On welcoming her courting beau Miss Wolf, ‘... tuck'n shuck 'erself 'fo' de lookin' glass a time er two, en den she tipt ter de do' en open' it little ways en peep out des lak she skeered some un gwine ter hit 'er clip side de head. Dar stood ole Brer Rabbit lookin' des ez slick ez a race-hoss...’²⁷

Brer Rabbit encapsulated the image of the smooth and stylish suitor in this scene whilst Miss Wolf aspired to particular feminine virtues and behaviour. Both served to illustrate a particular version of positive gendered identities that were denied to enslaved men and women in their role as slaves, but which were embraced in the arena of courtship. As Chapter Two of this thesis has already argued, the wider white community defined enslaved men as degraded examples of manhood. Enslaved women were cast as sexually promiscuous and lewd, the very antithesis of “true womanhood”. The gendered identities that were verbalised through folklore tales further enhanced the idea, discussed in Chapters

²⁵ Harris, “Mr. Rabbit Grossly Deceives Brer Fox”, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, 38.

²⁶ Harris, “Brother Rabbit and the Mosquitoes”, 222. (“prop-en-tickler” meaning “proper” and “particular”.)

²⁷ *Ibid.* 222-223.

Five and Six, that courtship was one social space within which the enslaved might adopt more positive and desirable gendered roles.

Moreover, these folklore tales challenged the blurring of gender divisions between enslaved men and women that were embedded in the work regimes on the plantation, by imposing specific feminine and masculine attributes on the characters of the tale. These gendered qualities were clearly illustrated in the folklore stories, and courtship was defined as a social context within which enslaved women and men could assume alternative notions of femininity and masculinity. The folklore tale thus articulated enslaved resistance to concepts and ideas embedded in the slave system and offered alternative notions about the gendered behaviour and roles of enslaved men and women.

It was in the context of courtship that the characters of the folklore tales could take on certain gender identities. Courting was carried out in the stories along specifically defined lines of gender that the enslaved community might have held up as an ideal. Uncle Remus explained in one story how ‘de creeturs wux constant gwine a-courtin’...En ‘twan’t none er dish yer “Howdy -do-ma’m-I-speck-I-better-be-gwine,” n’er. Hit ‘uz go atter brekkus and stay twel atter supper.’²⁸ The stories illustrated how the courtship of a couple should be carried out and the specific positions of the man and the woman within this process. They provided the man with the leading role in the pursuit of a relationship. In the contest over King Deer’s daughter for example, Brer Rabbit, , ‘...Stidder scollop in’ ‘roun’ en bowin’ en scrapin’, dey des go right straight atter de gal. Ole Brer Rabbit, he mouter had some bubbly-blossoms wrop up in his hankcher, but mostly him en Brer Fox ’ud des drap in on King Deer daughter en ‘gin ter cas sheep-eyes at ‘er...’²⁹ In turn female characters often occupied a

²⁸ Harris, “Brother Wolf Says Grace”, *Nights with Uncle Remus*, 149-156, 151.

²⁹ Harris, “Brother Fox, Brother Rabbit and King Deer’s Daughter”, 70.

more passive position, allowing men to court them rather than being the active agents of the relationship.

In the folklore tales, male characters were generally cast as the active participants, and females usually as an appendage of their menfolk. In reality, as Chapter Six of this thesis has illustrated, it was generally enslaved men who were the more active agents of the courting process. Where circumstance and slave-owner would allow, enslaved men did take the leading role when pursuing a particular woman. Folklore stories served to maintain and support this ideal but were set in a world which was largely free from the restrictions and limitations that slavery placed on the enslaved man and woman.

Yet, despite functioning as tales of enslaved wish fulfilment, these stories also acted as cautionary tales and conveyed the fears and suspicions that governed the limits of emotional investment in a relationship. Women, in particular, were central to those narratives that focussed on the negative experiences of courtship. Female characters occupied an ambivalent and sometimes duplicitous status in many of the folklore stories of the enslaved. She was sometimes cast in a passive role, as the trophy in the contest between two male suitors or as a spectator to the main narrative. Yet at other times, women were defined as foolish and naïve, or wicked and spiteful in nature. These undesirable qualities formed the basis of tales, which usually unfolded to the detriment of the female character.

Female pride was often punished severely in the tales through a trickster taking advantage of this feature. In the story of *Why Brother Bull Growls and Grumbles*, Brer Bull changed himself into a man and began courting a woman. Brer Bull's affections had such an effect on the woman that she could 'skacely cook dinner...she can't keep 'way fum de lookin'glass, a-breshin 'er ha'r en plasterin' down her beau-ketchers.' Her vanity, caused by Brer Bull's attention, can be seen to have clouded her judgement and it was only because of the little boy who lived with her that the true identity of her lover was revealed. 'He notice dat when de man wuz courtin', dey wan't no Brer Bull in de pastur, en when dey wan't no

man er courtin', dar wuz Brer Bull grazin' roun'.³⁰ The woman of the story was so flattered by her lover's attention that she failed to notice the true nature of his character. The full extent of her stupidity was revealed through the idea that even a young boy possessed more sense than she did. The story revealed the effects that courtship could have on women, turning them into vain fools. Yet it also reminded its audience of the need to be cautious with affairs of the heart. The courtship had caused the woman to wholly forget herself, and she began to neglect domestic duties, such as cooking dinner, in favour of looking in the mirror and brushing her hair. She was depicted as conceited and silly, blinded by the attentions of Brer Bull to such an extent that she could not see the reality of her situation.

Whilst Brer Rabbit's "biggoty manner" was admired in many of the tales, female pride and vanity were defined in terms of foolishness that could lead to a woman's downfall. In the story of *The Little Boy and His Dogs*, two panthers dressed as ladies visited the home of a little boy and his mother. She was so impressed by their clothes and manners that she pandered to their every need, ignoring the little boy's doubts regarding the identity of the two women. Here again a young boy is defined as having more sense than a fully-grown woman. When he exclaimed to his mother that the two ladies were lapping water, she responded saying, '...I reckon dat's de way de quality folks does, honey.' When the little boy again asked his mother what she thought because they had '...got little bit er hairy han's en arms', she again responded, '...I reckon all de quality folks is got um, honey.' The mother was so impressed by the ladies finery that she ignored her little boy's observations and demanded that he showed the two quality ladies the way down the road. Once far away from his home the panthers revealed their true identity, and the little boy was saved only by his two faithful dogs, Morack and Follerlinsko. At the end of the tale his mother seemed to

³⁰ Harris, *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, 81-90, 83.

have learned by her mistakes and declared that ‘...she ain’t never gwine ter set no sto’ by folks wid fine cloze, kaze dey so ‘ceitful; no, never, so long as de Lord mout spar’er.’³¹

Female characteristics that were ridiculed within the folklore tales were also referred to in the narratives of the formerly enslaved and the WPA collections. Elizabeth Johnson, whose parents had been enslaved in Georgia, recalled in her memoirs the “true and laughable” story told to her by her mother, who was nearly frightened to death by what she believed was the spirit of her old master, who was punishing her for wearing her mistress’s clothes,

... Mother had told me how she always admired & wished for the privilege of wearing the fine silks etc which belonged to her mistress in the days of slavery. So on one Sunday morning while the mistress had gone to church mother having to clean up her room in the usual way, she decided before cleaning up that she would (?) up in a full outfit of mistresses just at this splendid opportunity. So she went on to put on one of the handsome silk dresses with the old-style silk (?) bonnet to match including veil, gloves etc and while she was standing & turning before the mirror smiling in her madams finery, one of the mistresses female servants had slipped into the next room and all at once something fell very heavily, followed by a terrible groan, which frightened mother dreadfully, knowing that one of her old masters had died in this room, she thought perhaps it was his evil spirit enraged at her being arrayed in her madams finery, so there she was between two frights. She didn’t know whether to remain in the room, or to leave with the dressing on and just as she started to disrobe herself, there was another sound of noise followed by a harder groan, so she ran out, down stairs screaming, & this person right down behind her still

³¹ Harris, *Daddy Jake The Runaway*, 93-107, 95, 107.

groaning. She was afraid to look back and afraid of being caught on the outside with her mistresses dress and as she locked the back door on the lower floor this mischievous person burst in a loud laugh & laid hands on mother's shoulders.³²

Elizabeth Johnson's mother was aware that she should not have worn her mistress's clothes no matter how much she desired them. However, after having tried them on and paraded in her finery, she believed that she was about to be punished. The suspected "ghost" was another enslaved woman, yet both were aware that Elizabeth's mother had crossed the boundaries that separated slave from mistress, in not only desiring to be dressed like the white woman, but actually having taken on her identity through the wearing of her clothes. Whilst the trick that was played upon her was in jest, it also served as a reminder to her of her position in the social hierarchy of the plantation and that emulating the white quality folks was always cause for punishment.

If we compare the tale of Elizabeth Johnson's mother to that of the folklore story of the *Little Boy and His Dogs* discussed above, there are several parallels that can be drawn. Both Elizabeth's mother and the woman in the story were punished for their vanity. Both were envious of the dress worn by the quality folks and it was this admiration and jealousy that resulted in both women narrowly escaping tragedy. Had Elizabeth's mother been caught in her mistress's gowns she would probably have been whipped, if not worse. For the woman in the folklore story she nearly lost her son to the quality people, who were revealed as panthers who threatened his life. Both women learnt from their mistakes yet both stories, one fictitious, one factual, operated as cautionary tales to young women not to allow characteristics such as pride or vanity to overcome their thoughts and behaviour.

³² Elizabeth Johnson Harris, 1867-1942, Augusta, Georgia, Memoirs ca.1867-1922, *Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University*.

Whilst the women in the above stories were cast as foolish rather than corrupt, other female characters in the folklore tales were defined as malignant and evil. These women were usually possessed of some form of magical power that they used to do harm, especially to men. A common character in such stories was that of the witch woman, who slipped her skin or transformed herself, so that she might be disguised in order to trick her intended victim. Usually the witch was depicted as some sort of animal. For example, in *Uncle Remus's Wonder Story*, the Wolf-Witch changed itself into a woman when it was hungry in order to court an unsuspecting man, marry him and then eat him.³³ Similarly in the story of the *Man and the Wild Cattle*, a young white calf transformed herself into a beautiful young woman in order to take the man's mind off hunting and eventually create a circumstance where the herd might kill him.³⁴

The women in these stories were cast as dangerous and deceitful. It is interesting to note that in both tales, the narratives unfold in the context of courtship. These female characters were required to entrap men through love before their wicked designs could be carried out. The Wolf-Witch must *court* a man before she could satisfy her hunger and eat him, whilst the calf chooses to *marry* the hunter in order to kill him. These stories can be understood as warnings, reminding men that they should be careful when selecting a lover and also that they should not let beauty or love be the only consideration when choosing an appropriate wife.

The Wolf-Witch's real identity was revealed only after the man had sought the advice of "Jedge Rabbit", regarding her identity. "Jedge Rabbit" suggested that the man test her sincerity by asking her to milk the cow. The cow sensed the Wolf-Witch's smell and charged at her forcing the Wolf-Witch to jump the fence in order to escape. On jumping, the

³³ Harris, "Uncle Remus's Wonder Story", *Daddy Jake The Runaway*, 139-148.

³⁴ See, Harris, *Uncle Remus and his Friends*, 91-100.

shoeless wolf feet of the witch were exposed for the man to see, and the true identity of the witch was thus revealed. It is significant in the tale that the man sought the advice of “Jedge Rabbit”, a respected member of the community, concerning his relationship. “Jedge Rabbit’s” opinion was considered because, the tale explained, ‘ez he bin livin’ ‘roun’ dar a mighty long time. Ole Jedge Rabbit...done got ole in age en gray in de min’. He done sober up an' settle down...’³⁵ The tale illustrated the fact that the advice and influence of elders could often prove invaluable in making the right choices regarding a partner. As Chapter Five has argued, the advice of parents and older members of the enslaved community was probably a significant factor shaping the courting experiences of the enslaved. This tale thus reflected an important and significant aspect of enslaved courtship.

In the story of *The Man and the Wild Cattle* the white calf’s identity was never revealed to the hunter, but after falling for her disguise as a beautiful young woman, the hunter was distracted from other pursuits and stopped hunting the herd. He was nearly killed later by a stampede of cattle, only to be saved by his two dogs, who destroyed the charging bulls and a snow white cow. In both tales the warning regarding sexually aggressive women is particularly clear. Both the Wolf Witch and the white calf used their sexual appeal in order to enchant the men in question. It was only after the intervention of elders (“Jedge Rabbit”) or loyal companions (faithful dogs) that the two men were saved from tragic consequences. Both tales illustrated the need for men to be wise in their selection of a partner, seeking the advice or aid of others before making any firm commitment to the relationship.

³⁵ Harris, “Uncle Remus’s Wonder Story”, 143.

7.6: Gator Toofs and Special Signs

Magic was a central element of the culture of the enslaved and charms and signs were often used as points of reference and reaction. In folklore we see this aspect of enslaved life direct the actions of Brer Rabbit and company, especially in the context of courtship. Magic was used by the enslaved as a means of escape and opposition, an aspect of life that only the enslaved could control, rather than their white masters and mistresses. Dollard has argued that ‘Magic accepts the status quo; it takes the place of political activity, agitation, organization, solidarity or any real moves to change status...magic in brief is a control gesture, a comfort to the individual, an accommodation attitude to helplessness.’³⁶ Yet, one could also view the use of magic for the enslaved as a challenge to the status quo, as a means to change their situation through a force their white slave-owners failed to understand. Certainly in the realm of courtship, magic and charms were used by the enslaved to alter a relationship for the better, either by changing the way somebody felt or warding off one’s opponents.

In the narrative of his life whilst enslaved in Kentucky, Henry Bibb described how he made use of a conjuror in his efforts to win the attention of a young woman on his plantation. The conjuror suggested that Henry used charms to attract her attention, including the bone of a dried frog and a lock of her hair, which he was instructed to wear in his shoes. Henry Bibb found little success in these magical charms.³⁷ However, what was significant was that his faith in the use of such charms continued despite their lack of success. Even after the dried frog bone had scared the young woman rather than won her heart, Henry returned to another conjuror seeking another love charm. The use of magic as a force in the daily lives of the enslaved was related in the WPA narratives by several of the respondents.

³⁶ J. Caste. Dollard, cited in Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 235.

³⁷ “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb”, 450-51.

For example, Patsy Mitchner declared that although she had never had a spell put on her that she, ‘... knowed a woman once who had a spell put on ‘er, en’ it hurt her feet...’³⁸ Similarly, Ellen Trell told the story of her mother who had a spell put on her ‘...she lay in bed talking to herself and sweating draps of sweat as big as the end of my finger...’³⁹ It may well have been the case that both women were suffering from some sort of illness. Patsy and Ellen relate the fact that after visiting a white witch doctor both women were cured of their ailments. Yet even if the supposed effects of a magic spell were in fact a fever, these narratives are indicative of the fundamental position that magic occupied in the lives of the enslaved. The strong beliefs in the power of magic and spells made many fearful of any suspect witches. For example Penny Williams slept with a knife under her pillow ever since a witch had tried to ride her. She explained that ‘I was in de bed, an’ she thought dat I was ‘sleep. I feels her when she crawls up on my lef’ leg an’ stops de circulation. I knows how ter fix her do’ so I gits up an’ puts a knife under my pillow.’⁴⁰ Laura Sorrell’s parents were so frightened of the effects of magic that they paid the witch doctor ‘...a right smart ter keep off de witches.’⁴¹

This confidence in the power of magic and the fundamental significance of the witch doctor was replicated in the folklore tales, where Brer Rabbit often employed magic or the use of a conjuror, in order to win a woman. In the story of *Brother Rabbit’s Love Charm*, Brer Rabbit met with an African man who suggested that the only way he could win his girls heart was through the use of a charm bag containing ‘...one el’phan’ tush...one ‘gater

³⁸ Patsy Mitchner, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 121.

³⁹ Ellen Trell, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 361.

⁴⁰ Penny Williams, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 405.

⁴¹ Laura Sorell, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 298.

toof...[and] one rice-bud bill...' ⁴² Brer Rabbit gathered the various objects through his usual cunning and devious means, and once collected Brer Rabbit, '...tekky da el'phan' tush, 'e tekky da 'gater toof, 'e tekky da rice-bud bill, he pit um in lil bag;'e swing dem bag 'pon B'er Rabbit neck. Den B'er Rabbit kin marry dem nounge gal. Enty!' ⁴³ In the same way that Henry Bibb had collected articles to act as love charms, Brer Rabbit, under the instructions of a conjuror, had also sought specific items with which he hoped to attract the attentions of a certain young lady. The tale demonstrated that magic was an important and essential element in the life of the enslaved, particularly in the arena of courtship. Whether these spells or charms actually worked was hardly the point of the exercise. What was significant for the enslaved was their faith in the force of such magic, which perhaps provided them with the confidence to act.

This significance of magic in the life of the enslaved was also illustrated in the story of *Brother Rabbit's Courtship*. Brer Rabbit found himself hopelessly in love with a girl who refused to marry anybody until she received some sort of sign. Ironically she told him that '...I got too much sense – myse'f – fer ter be gittin married without no sign er no dream...Des any kinder sign; don't make no difference w'at. I done try all de spells en I ain't see no sign yit.' The girl continued by listing the different things she had tried to attempt to attract a suitor or at least discover the identity of her future betrothed. She exclaimed,

I tuck 'n fling a ball er yarn outen de window at midnight, en dey ain't nobody
come en wind it. I tuck a lookin'-glass en look down in de well en I ain't see

⁴² It is interesting to note the character of the "African Man" in Brother Rabbits Love Charm. The "African Man" seems to appear only in the Uncle Remus stories when associated with magic, spells and charms. This perhaps demonstrates some continuities with the African heritage of the enslaved. The use of magic and charms in the Americas has often been seen as a survival from Africa in the New World. For a further discussion of this see Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*; Mintz and Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture*; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*.

⁴³ Harris, "Brother Rabbits Love Charm", as told by Daddy Jack in *Nights with Uncle Remus*, 202-207, 206.

nothin' 't all. I tuck a hard-b'iled egg en scoop de yaller out, en fill it up wid salt en eat it widout drinkin' any water. Den I went ter bed, but I ain't dream 'bout a blessed soul. I went out 'twix' sunset an' dark en fling hempseed over my lef' shoulder, but I ain't see no beau yit.

With such a revelation Brer Rabbit laid his plans and provided the girl with a sign by means of a "secret singer" who told the girl that she would see her beau down by the big pine. When the girl next visited the big pine, there was Brer Rabbit waiting for her to arrive. 'Dey jawered 'roun' a right smart, en 'spute 'long wid one 'n'er. But Brer Rabbit, he got de gal.'⁴⁴ Through his actions Brer Rabbit exposed the fact that magic could not always be relied upon to achieve the desired outcome. However, he used the *idea* of magic to execute his plan, relying on the girl's belief that a supernatural sign would appear to indicate her destiny. Like Miss Wolf in the corn shucking tale discussed earlier, the girl in *Brother Rabbit's Courtship* seemed to possess bad judgement when it came to selecting an appropriate beau. Her reliance on magic and signs rather than her own feelings ultimately allowed Brer Rabbit to guide her decision. The folktales thus saw love fall victim to the deceit of the trickster character. They therefore suggested that it was better to be guided by one's feelings and emotions rather than place any faith in the corrupting influence of magic and further highlighted the underhand methods that the trickster character might have resorted to in the contest of courtship.

7.7: Metaphors For Love

Brother Rabbit's Courtship and *Brother Rabbit's Love Charm* both illustrated the significance of magic and the belief in signs and spells within the enslaved community.

⁴⁴ Harris, "Brother Rabbits Courtship", *Daddy Jake The Runaway*, 188-198, 193-194, 195.

However they also both defined love in a metaphorical sense. In both tales, being in love produced quite visible effects on Brer Rabbit. When Brer Rabbit met with the African man in the story of the *Love Charm*, the African man, who we can assume to represent the medicine man on the plantation, was startled by Brer Rabbit's sickly appearance. He asked him, 'what mekky you is look so puny lak dis? Who is bin hu't-a you feelin?' The African man then gave Brer Rabbit a check over, 'Affiky mans, 'e mek B'er Rabbit stick out'e tounge, 'eis count Brer Rabbit pulse. E shekky 'e head; 'e de say: Hi, B'er Rabbit! Wut all dis? You is bin ketch-a da gal-fever...' ⁴⁵

Being in love was defined as an illness with physical and visible influences upon Brer Rabbit that could be deciphered by a check of the pulse. The cure was to be found in the creation of the charm bag, which was prescribed by the African man. 'Affiky mans, 'e say B'er Rabbit no kin git da gal 'cep' 'e is mek 'im one cha'm bag.' The charm bag allowed Brer Rabbit to at least believe he could win the girls heart. 'B'er Rabbit 'e is feel so good, 'e jump up high; 'e is bin crack'e heel; 'e shekky da Affiky man be de han'. ⁴⁶ Brer Rabbit was thus cured off his love sickness and his hope was restored that he might be able to win the young lady's heart.

Similarly in *Brother Rabbit's Courtship*, when Brer Rabbit told his intended sweetheart that he'd been feeling "right po'ly", the young lady laughed at him and suggested that '...I speck you in love, Brer Rabbit. You ought ter go off some'rs en git you a wife.' ⁴⁷ In both tales it was Brer Rabbit's unrequited love that produced visible effects on him and made him appear sickly. It was not the actual feeling of love that caused the illness in Brer

⁴⁵ Harris, "Brother Rabbits Love Charm", 203-204.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 204.

⁴⁷ Harris, "Brother Rabbit's Courtship", 193.

Rabbit but the fear that his love might not be returned and his not knowing how to capture the heart of his beloved.

The idea that love was not just an emotional feature of life but that which manifested itself physically provides certain clues about the ways in which love might have been understood by the enslaved in the American South. The folklore tales do not provide any consistent or coherent picture about how the enslaved understood love, yet they do communicate the view that love was an important and significant feature of enslaved life that could produce emotional and physical affects on individuals.

The enslaved also discussed love in such terms in the course of their narratives. Harriet Jacobs, posed the question ‘Why does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence?’⁴⁸ Harriet Jacobs’ definition of love suggests the intensity of feeling an individual might develop for another and the tragedy and pain caused when such emotions could not be expressed or received. Thus, as in the folklore tales discussed above, we might understand this concept of love in terms of its physical effects. Henry Bibb also understood love in such terms. On meeting his future wife, Malinda, an enslaved mulatta from a neighbouring plantation, Henry claimed to know that she loved him, ‘...I could read it by the warm reception with which the dear girl always met me, and treated me in her mother’s house. I could read it by the warm and affectionate shake of the hand and gentle smile upon her lovely cheek...I could read it in the language of her bright and sparkling eye, pencilled by the unchangeable finger of nature that spake but could not lie.’⁴⁹ Malinda’s love was thus

⁴⁸ Harriet Jacobs, “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl – Written by Herself”, (Boston, 1861), in, William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr, [eds.], *Slave Narratives*, (New York, Literary Classics of the United States, 2000), 782.

⁴⁹ “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself”, (New York, 1849), in Andrews and Gates, *Slave Narratives*, 453.

represented as something that was physical, registered in her eyes and confirmed in her affectionate behaviour towards Henry.

Respondents in the WPA narratives also revealed something about the ways in which love was understood by the enslaved. For example, Barbara Haywood, who was discussed in Chapter Six, recalled that when her intended, Frank, was working at the City Market in Fayetteville street, she would deliberately go out of her way on her journey to and from school just to catch a glimpse of him, because she explained, ‘...You see I has been in love with him for a long den...’⁵⁰ Barbara Haywood refers to the idea of love in a similar way to the folklore stories. Just as love had produced visible effects on Brer Rabbit, it was love which had made Barbara Haywood behave in a certain way, directing her actions and governing her movements. Chapter Three has offered a discussion of Stone’s concept of romantic love, which he argues was based upon ideas of mutual attraction and consent. Certainly in Barbara Haywood’s narrative love is presented as something that must be returned and grounded in feelings that were reciprocated. She was forced to silently watch and wait until Frank initiated their relationship, which he eventually did.

It seems that love was not considered as worthy by the enslaved until feelings of attraction and affection were returned. Henry Bibb for example, described his growing feelings towards Malinda as the result of the ‘...fascinating charms of a female...’⁵¹ He further remarked that ‘It is truly marvellous to see how sudden a man’s mind can be changed by the charms and influences of a female...In spite of myself, before I was aware of it, I was deeply in love; and what made this passion so effectual and almost irresistible, I became satisfied that it was reciprocal.’⁵² Whilst Henry Bibb does not expand on what the specific

⁵⁰ Barbara Haywood, interviewed for the WPA narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 387.

⁵¹ “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb”, 452.

⁵² *Ibid.* 453.

charms and influences of a female might have been, his love for Malinda was grounded in the fact that she reciprocated his feelings. Henry's descriptions of his feelings towards Malinda represent an ideal of romantic love that were grounded in notions of mutual attraction, affection and consent.

Other narratives in the WPA collection referred to love in terms of its everlasting and eternal force. For example, Lily Perry recalled in her narrative that she and Robert had been raised up together and she declared, ' I loved him frum de time I was borned...'⁵³ Whilst Barbara Haywood's first meeting with Frank was not characterised by such affection it had been established and progressed over a number of years. She explained that 'I was a little girl, cryin' an' bawlin' an Frank, who wus a big boy said dat he neber wanted ter spank a youngin' so bad, an' I ain't liked him no better dan he did me.'⁵⁴ Neither Lily Perry's or Barbara Haywood's relationships had been casual or short-term affairs, but had developed over a long period of time. Despite the suggestions made by the white community that the relationships of the enslaved were spontaneous and shallow, based upon sexual urges and physical desire, these narratives indicated that the enslaved understood and framed their relationships in terms that might be considered as examples of romantic love.

On the basis of such evidence, it is evident that the enslaved did embrace ideas of romantic love. As Chapter One has already discussed, the methodological problems involved when using sources such as the narratives of formerly enslaved men and women, and the published folklore tales, means that it is not possible to analyse the language in which the enslaved thought and talked about these relationships. There is little way of establishing through such material whether a rhetoric of romance existed amongst the

⁵³ Lily Perry, interviewed for the WPA Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 15, pt. 2, 165.

⁵⁴ Barbara Haywood, interviewed for the WPA narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 14, pt. 1, 386.

enslaved, as it did amongst the white southern elite in the antebellum American South. However, if we consider the behaviour of enslaved men and women such as Barbara Haywood and Henry Bibb, in the context of the courting relationship, and the meanings and definitions that structured enslaved courtships, as revealed through sources such as the WPA narratives and the folklore tale, the relationships of enslaved men and women can be understood within concepts that were intimately linked to ideas of romantic love.

The folklore tales reflected the view of the enslaved that courtship was a contest and that the enslaved were required to compete for the object of their affections. Moreover, in considering the meaning and significance of this competition in the arena of courtship, folklore stories illustrated alternative versions of gendered roles and identity that were available to enslaved men and women. The very fact that the themes of courtship and love occurred in these tales so often is suggestive of the fundamental significance of these issues to the life experiences of the enslaved. Furthermore, through these stories we can begin to understand what love itself might have represented for the enslaved. Ideas concerning love that were represented in the folklore tales can be linked to the realities of enslaved life and the ways in which the enslaved themselves talked about and reflected on the nature of their own courtship experiences.

Conclusion

Deborah Gray White claimed in her work that whilst, ‘ ...Slave romances existed, and courtship was one of the rites slave masters could not eliminate, if indeed they ever wanted to. However, for every marriage that was anchored in romantic love there was probably one that grew out of pragmatic considerations.’¹ White made this claim in 1985, yet still few historians have paid any serious historical attention to those relationships between enslaved men and women that were anchored in romantic love or the rites of courtship that slave masters could not eliminate. While recent historical work such as that of Emily West and Stephanie Camp has focussed upon the meaning and significance of personal relationships for the enslaved, the prevalent concern of most historians has been the destructive influence of slavery upon the familial relationships of the enslaved, and the practicalities for the enslaved of establishing and maintaining a familial unit.

This research thus builds upon existing work concerning the enslaved and contributes to the current historiography in numerous ways. Emily West has already provided a focussed and sustained discussion concerning the relationships that developed between enslaved men and women. However, her analysis is primarily concerned with the overall concept of the family amongst the enslaved community, which she explores through a consideration of various aspects of enslaved life, including courtship and marriage, the gendered division of labour within the enslaved family and on the plantation, and the master’s abuse of enslaved women. This thesis focuses upon one aspect of West’s research, enslaved courtship, and places it under the microscope. It thus provides a more detailed and extensive examination of this element of enslaved life and courtship thus emerges as an important social event in its own right amongst the enslaved, rather than as a prelude to something of more significance, such as marriage or the management of familial ties.

¹ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 150.

This thesis also feeds into a separate historiography concerning love and courtship in the American South. By questioning the absence of the enslaved in such historical considerations, and suggesting that there are significant themes already established in existing work relating to the white southern elite that might be used to consider the relationships of the enslaved, this research has highlighted and begins to fill a substantial gap. For example, the narratives presented provide significant evidence of relationships between enslaved men and women that were anchored in romantic love and that have been waiting for serious historical attention to be paid to them. The recollections concerning Tempie and Exter Herndon, Barbara and Frank Haywood or Lily and Robert Perry suggest that romantic love was not beyond reach for enslaved men and women. The personal considerations shaping courtships for these enslaved men and women were factors such as mutual consent, sexual attraction and a depth of feeling and affection that was reciprocated. Such elements correspond to historical understandings of romantic love as conceptualised by scholars such as Lawrence Stone.²

The existence of such relationships amongst the enslaved would suggest that the development of romantic love was not dependent upon certain economic, political or ideological forces, as suggested by historians who have followed Stone's line of enquiry.³ The majority of the enslaved were remote from forces, such as the ideological underpinnings of the Revolution, which Fliegalman has suggested promoted a vision of familial relations in North America characterised by mutual consent, affection and voluntarism – the basis of romantic love - which flourished in the antebellum period.⁴ Thus, evidence from this thesis suggests that the existing historiography of love and courtship may require some reconsideration if more marginalized elements of society, such as the enslaved, can be seen to have operated within ideals based upon notions of romantic love, and can thus be included in such historical analysis.

² Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*.

³ See for example Fliegalman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*; Lewis, *Pursuits of Happiness*.

⁴ Fliegalman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, Chapter Five, "Affectionate Unions and the New Voluntarism".

It is bewildering and yet exhilarating for the historian to stumble upon a consideration or a question that has been largely neglected within previous historical interpretations and yet seems a glaringly obvious aspect to address. The richness of the sources available concerning the courtships of the enslaved, and the themes that emerge out of this material that might be linked to the those that structure the current historiography on love and courtship amongst the white elite, leaves one bemused that other historians have not already recognised their importance. This thesis illustrates that it is no longer possible to justify the neglect of the enslaved in accounts concerning love, romance and courtship in the American South. I have elaborated upon this argument in the course of this thesis by drawing out ideas such as consent, gendered identities in the realm of courtship and familial advice – all of which are central to our understandings of the courting behaviour of the white southern elite – to demonstrate their centrality and significance to the courtships of the enslaved.

The main focus of this research has been upon the ways in which the enslaved managed their courting relationships from within the system of slavery. However, this begs the question of where enslaved ideals concerning love, courtship practices and gender roles and identities derived from. This thesis has tentatively suggested that certain features of the courtship experience for the enslaved during the antebellum period were comparable to that of their white master and mistress. It has also shown that the enslaved assumed certain positive gendered identities within the realm of courtship that were similar to those of elite white understandings of femininity and masculinity. This thesis therefore serves as a basis for further questions regarding the processes of cultural adaptation in the emotional lives of the enslaved. However, extensive additional research is required before any conclusions can be made on such matters.

Furthermore, whilst I have offered an analysis of enslaved courtship in antebellum North Carolina it would be interesting to consider these research questions in other locations across the American South. This research highlights the fact that questions of courtship and romantic love have not figured largely in the historiography concerning enslaved life. Those historians such as Gutman, who have focussed upon the emotional dynamics of enslaved

relationships, have been subject to criticisms of romanticism and idealism.⁵ In an attempt to move away from such critiques, this thesis has focussed upon the ways in which the system of slavery influenced the form that enslaved courtships could take, whilst also magnifying the subjective experiences of these relationships for the enslaved in a particular slave-holding state. By locating these concerns in other states, where different influences may have impacted on the experiences of enslavement, it may be possible to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the enslaved life across the antebellum American South.

As I have argued in the course of this thesis, courtship for the enslaved was a process of negotiation, subversion and resistance. In order to understand the internal dynamics of the courting relationship for the enslaved it is necessary to view it from within the system of slavery itself. It is then possible to see the ways in which courtship might be written into a discourse of resistance, rather than as a romanticised or idealised aspect of enslaved life. I have maintained throughout this thesis that the courting relationships of the enslaved did not operate in a vacuum, but were enmeshed within the wider power networks that structured daily life in the slave-holding South.

Courtship and love cannot be extracted from these wider networks of power that governed the life of the enslaved. However, courtship formed an avenue of discreet resistance for the enslaved. They were able to manage their courtships through a dual process of resistance and accommodation. A dialogue, established between master and “slave”, and based on elements of consent and authority, governed many first meetings and the subsequent courting behaviour of enslaved men and women. Masters and mistresses very often had a hand in deciding with whom their slaves could socialise and create relationships. This interest of the slave-owner in the intimate relationships of their slave population may have been motivated by economic gain. Certainly some slave-owners did force relationships between enslaved men and women, based on the pursuit of profit. However, many other masters, and mistresses in particular, interfered in the emotional dimensions of enslaved life because of

⁵ See for example, White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, Chapter Five, “Men, Women and Families, esp. 149-153..

their assumed rights over their human chattel. In return the enslaved understood that opportunities to socialise with other enslaved men and women or to establish courtships were generally dependent on maintaining favourable relations with the slave-owner. Thus the success of a courtship largely depended on their own ability to negotiate these terms of acceptance and consent from their master and mistress.

Furthermore, this thesis also suggests that courtship provided an arena within which the enslaved could actively resist the controls and regulations that structured their lives. Developing the research of Emily West and Stephanie Camp, this research has highlighted the ways in which the enslaved strove to establish alternative social spaces within which they were able to develop relationships that were temporarily removed from the temporal and spatial boundaries of plantation life. Defiance of plantation rules, the evasion of the slave patrols and even pursuing a relationship that their owner disapproved of, should be understood as determined and decisive acts of resistance by the enslaved. Courtship then should not only be viewed within the context of the emotional dynamics of enslaved life but as a significant and fundamental aspect of enslaved resistance to the system of slavery.

The narratives used throughout this thesis reflect a wealth of material that can illuminate our current understandings of enslaved life, culture and ideals. The WPA narratives are replete with examples of the ways in which the enslaved managed their courtships and their beliefs concerning the meaning of these relationships. In particular, this thesis highlights a distinct aspect of the cultural world of the enslaved that has rarely been used by historians in order to gain further insight into enslaved ideals and values regarding courtship and love. The folklore tale provides an invaluable means of access into the internal world of the enslaved. Questions concerning ideas about love were threaded throughout the tales, whilst the contest of courtship formed the basis of several of the stories. By critically examining these stories historians may discover a wealth of evidence relating to the internal belief system that structured the personal world of the enslaved.

When Alonzo Haywood, whose narrative is cited in the Introduction to this thesis, asserted in the 1930s, that enslaved love was nothing to laugh about, he pointed to a multitude

of widely held assumptions and popular stereotypes regarding the gendered characteristics of enslaved men and women and the nature of their personal relationships. These beliefs persisted in historical understandings of enslaved life until well into the late twentieth century. However, this thesis suggests that Alonzo Haywood's evaluation of his parent's relationship, as being based on a love that was eternal and enviable, may well encapsulate the way in which many amongst the enslaved in antebellum North Carolina thought about and understood their courtship experiences and intimate affairs.

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